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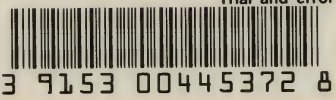

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TRIAL AND ERROR

A KEY TO THE SECRET OF

Writing and Selling

TRIAL AND ERROR

A KEY TO THE SECRET OF

Writing & Selling

By

JACK WOODFORD *pseud.*

Introduction by

ARNOLD GINGRICH

Editor of ESQUIRE

GARDEN CITY PUBLISHING CO., INC.

Garden City, New York

1940
Garden City Publishing Co., Inc.

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Printed in the United States of America

for *LOUELLA ANNETTE WOOLFOLK*, whose heartening loyalty and ebullient courage illuminated dark hours with a radiance that made relative evaluations at last clear.

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introduction by Arnold Gingrich

It was my first job. I was twenty-one. I was six hundred dollars in the hole, having borrowed that much to cover hospital and doctor bills. The salary was barely adequate to keep reasonably even with the 1926 cost of living. The six hundred dollar debt was worrying me the day the new copywriter moved in at the desk next to mine.

I was supposed to be writing ads, but actually I was working on budget figures, beneath my pad of copy paper, every time the boss was out of sight.

Suddenly out of the typewriter at the next desk came a clatter like the sound of a stick being dragged along a picket fence. I had never heard anybody type so fast and so steadily. I asked him whether he had ever been a telegraph operator, and it turned out that he had been. He had also been a hoofer at the Hippodrome, among many other things.

He was rising thirty at the time, and he looked much more like Walter Winchell then than Winchell does now. That first day, at lunch, I learned that he had just sold his thousandth short story. At the same time, he learned about my budget and the $600 deficit that was driving me crazy.

"Why don't you grind out some short stories?"

"Yeah," I answered him, "or why don't I give a dance

recital, or a violin concert? I would, except that I'm not a dancer or a violinist."

"But I could show you how to write stories. You might need talent to be a dancer or a violinist, but anybody who can read without moving his lips can write stories that will sell."

And, believe it or not, he did. He showed me a formula as simple as warming up canned soup, and I followed it for ten stories. All ten sold, averaging $75 each. I don't know, now, what I did with the $150 surplus over the $600 debt, but I do know that he refused to accept it as commission. And I know, too, that he told me nothing then that he doesn't tell you now in the chapter on the short story in this book.

Reading this book when it first appeared, for the first twenty chapters or so I kept saying to myself, "This is the best damn book on writing I've ever read." But after reaching the chapter called "Warm Plunge: The Novel," I found myself saying, "By God, I'm working on a novel."

And I was. I followed the directions in the last chapters as immediately and as literally as if they were the usher's remarks on the way to find the washroom.

And when I dried off after taking the warm plunge, I discovered I had written a novel that hit the American best-seller lists (what if it did hit them a more or less glancing blow, it hit 'em, that's the point), and that enjoyed what Frank Scully calls a *flop d'estime* in the

English edition, yet is even now being translated into the Hungarian.

This is a revised, enlarged edition of this book, containing new material that has long been needed. Of the old model, I've owned about a dozen copies. (People are always borrowing it and never bringing it back, and I can't say I blame them.) And I think I've sold about a thousand. That's how I got the chance to write this introduction to a new edition.

Now look, reader, you could do the same. All you have to do is get yourself a lot of lecture dates, and during each lecture have somebody ask you if there's any one book that gives the *open sesame* to the cash-money in the writing racket, and then answer, as I have, that there is, as it happens, only one, and that it's *Trial and Error* by Jack Woodford.

Do that for about three years straight (only first read the book as thoroughly as I have), and say it every chance you get (only you must really believe it as firmly as I do), and then the publishers will be around asking you if you would please write a few introductory words to a new edition. And if the gospel in this book has helped you as much as it helped me, if it has jerked you out from behind the eight ball as happily and speedily as it did in my case, you'll not only be willing to say a few things about this book, you'll practically feel like paying for the privilege.

But there I go, stealing the author's stuff, starting on that "You, too, can write" theme. Well, there are a lot

of fellows telling you that "You too can write" stuff. But Jack Woodford is the only one who goes on to prove it!

Buy, beg, borrow or steal this copy of this book, and let him.

—Arnold Gingrich
Editor: *Esquire Magazine*
Coronet Magazine

introduction

In most branches of human endeavor there is said to be a right and a wrong way of doing things.

In writing there can only be *your* way, whether you pose as an aesthete, or whether you frankly admit that you write for money.

The following pages, at best, set forth only my way of writing; it is a not particularly good way, I am reasonably certain, since critics of high calibre have assured me of this.

Please remember as you read that the book is called a dithyramb; in it you will find none of that stately excellence of organization which marks other books on writing, and theses designed to secure the degree of *Philosophiae Doctor.*

JACK WOODFORD

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money."
SAMUEL JOHNSON

chapter--

I

COLD PLUNGE

"Literature happens to be the only occupation in which wages are not given in proportion to the goodness of the work done."

FROUDE

SO THEN, YOU ARE THINKING OF WRITING.

If you had decided to become a doctor, a lawyer, or even a Christian Science practitioner, you would contemplate from two to five years of schooling before practising. Usually it takes a lot longer than that to become a moderately "successful" writer.

Nevertheless, you say, away with all that—you've heard it said before. You are going to become a writer forthwith and begin practising upon editors immediately. I know better than to reason with you, or to attempt to restrain you. I would not have been reasoned with or restrained when *I* was in your present frame of mind, some fifteen years ago. I went right ahead and wrote—and I sold the first story I wrote. The title was, "No One To Blame But Himself."

Now that we have fully decided that you are not to be restrained or delayed in becoming a writer, what next?

What equipment have you for becoming a writer? . . . Let us say none. Most writers have no equipment for becoming a writer. I didn't have any when I began, I have none now, and I never will have any. The only ones I know who possess the proper equipment for becoming a writer are professors of literature and literary critics—and they seldom write much. I am told that this is a great pity.

Well, anyway, you've got a typewriter, have you not? I hope so. Writing with a pen or a pencil is not very satisfactory, for the reason that if you do so learn to write, you will find it very difficult later to switch to a typewriter, or to dictation; and when you begin to sell, you will have to write a very great lot to make a living—for rates paid to free lance authors are not what you think.

Of course you have paper; including a carbon sheet. Yes indeed, you must make a carbon copy of what you write. Editors lose stories, spill gin on them, and burn holes in them with cigarettes. Technically, they "lose" them; you are not told about the gin and cigarettes. When such losses occur, if you have not a carbon copy, far from feeling badly about what he has done, the editor will merely upbraid you for not keeping carbon copies.

And, too, printers lose sheets out of stories; stories

that have been paid for. When this happens, if you have not a carbon record of the story, the editor will send you downright poison pen letters.

So there you are, paper, typewriter, and the determination to write. . . . And, theoretically, no equipment. Splendid.

Put the paper into your typewriter. See how awesomely blank it looks! Dear! Dear! Paper never looks so blank as when it is placed in a typewriter and one sits before it at least faintly determined to put something salable on it.

Salable . . . !

There's the whole problem.

What's most salable?

We'll begin with short forms.

Nothing is so salable as a love story. Fully ninety percent of everything sold to editors and publishers is about "love."

What! You don't know what love is? You think it's a rationalization of the sex impulse? Naughty! Get that notion right out of your head. Love, if it cannot be isolated and stained in any other way can, at least, for our clinical purposes here, be described as something that editors and publishers will buy and buy and buy. . . . So if you do not believe in what editors and publishers and motion picture directors are thought to call "love," you better begin to believe in it right now, because you will never make any money as a writer unless you believe in love.

But don't worry. The editors, publishers and motion picture directors don't believe in it either; of that you can be very certain. They do the same practical thing about "love" personally, that most of us do. So then, the first thing to do is to see eye to eye with editors, publishers and motion picture directors about this great love hoax.

Now that *that's* settled, what's a love story? There is only one love story. It has been written over and over for generations, and it will probably be salable for more generations. The plot in bare outline is simply this:

A beautiful female creature meets a beautiful male creature. They do *not* at once, fall in love; but it is obvious to the reader, from the beginning, that they *ought* to fall in love. Because readers are like that they will be overjoyed and for some pathological reason downright surprised when, after carrying your story along through the opening pages, you do have the beautiful male and female creatures fall in love.

Know what sadism is?

Well, if you don't, don't be embarrassed; nobody else knows, for sure, either. It is a strange latency in the human mind, strong in some, weak in others, which makes the average reader become restless if the Course of True Love runs smoothly.

You have opened your story with a beautiful male creature and a beautiful female creature who ought to fall in love. You have teased the reader a bit about this, and then had your two characters sure enough fall in

love. Now, something dark and threatening must fall athwart their love. Editors call this the "complication," because they like to say complicated things about simple matters.

In this complication, it will appear to the reader that the two creatures of the *opposite sex* (this is *very* important) who have fallen in love, are not going to be able to get together in a satisfactory manner. Here a very strange psychological thing occurs. The reader knows perfectly well that the pair will marry or arrive at a less complex adjustment in the end, according as to whether it is a pure love story or a naughty one; yet, despite his knowledge, nay, downright certainty of this, he will worry about the complication. Why this should be only Heaven knows. But it is quite true.

If you are a person of intelligence, you will have a hard time convincing yourself, as you come to write your first stories that readers are going to be silly enough to get worked up over your complication when they very well know that everything is going to come out all right in the end. *They will* get worked up over it. Have no doubt at all about that.

During the course of this complication which must threaten the love had and held as between the two characters, there must be "suspense."

In this suspense lies to a very great extent the difference between a readily salable story and one hard to sell. Authors are a lazy lot; especially beginning authors who imagine that they can turn to writing to escape

hard work. It is very hard to work up suspense, because the mind of the writer shies from the job and he becomes impatient since the items of suspense delay his finishing the story. To neglect suspense is certainly expensive. To attend to it is merely a matter of detail requiring hard mental work and patience. It is extremely simple. The automobile that is speeding toward the imperiled loved one must be delayed. Every imaginable sort of minor and usually very silly incident which may tend to make things look dark for the pair in love must be duly hauled in and dwelt upon.

But there is relief in sight. There is nothing left now to do but provide the ending. And the ending is inevitable, unless you strain. In the end the lovers either get married, or come to some such comparable arrangement, according to the type of magazine for which you are writing. If you can work some sort of surprise for the reader into the ending, so much the better; but at any rate, at the conclusion of the story, he should feel satisfied as to sweet love's victory.

Certainly nothing could be simpler than that; however, if you are really gifted with imagination, as you think you are (otherwise you wouldn't be reading a book on how to write) you can devise various "trick" endings. The master of these was, of course, the late revered O. Henry. Rather than take up time here discussing trick endings, may I simply refer you to O. Henry's works. Far from having any trouble in finding them, you will have had endless trouble, long before

this, in defending yourself from them, because they have been sold from door to door and offered as premiums with soap for years. . . . And all because of Mr. Porter's trick endings.

If you suffer from indigestion or malfunctioning glands, you will be tempted to have the heroine murdered by the hero in the end; or have them both blown up, or drowned, or poisoned. If you are going to write stories like that I would enjoy them, myself, far more than the stories I am advising you to write. I am always tempted to drown or poison my heroes and heroines—my trouble is auto-intoxication—but it is almost impossible to sell such stories, even if they are really "arty," whatever art is. The best that can be done with them is to place them with magazines that pay in free copies or free subscriptions. I wrote such stories by the dozen, once, and had them published in every "arty" magazine in this and two other countries. I did it with the notion that since to write such stories was fun, I might as well have some fun out of writing and at the same time get some arty publicity, through the frequent appearance of my name in these purple, short lived journals. I did have some fun; and still do; but the publicity isn't worth anything.

The love story formula I have outlined for you is the only stock in trade of endless numbers of the most "successful" writers in this country; many of whom have never written any story but the one I have just de-

scribed, and never will. (We shall examine into other types of stories later.)

But your white paper is still blank—I have only succeeded in confusing you, I am afraid. All right, let's get down to scarifying detail.

Your first story is going to be hard to write. Of course it is. If it wasn't hard, any plain fool could make a living writing—and then what would we do for telephone operators and street car conductors?

You ought to expect it to be hard; but if you'll huff a little, and even puff slightly and bear with me I think we can get this first story of yours written.

The most important thing about any piece of written work, in the free lance commercial fiction racket, is not its plot, its characters; treatment, style, or "true worth" (whatever that may be!)

The most important question is: Where are you going to sell the thing after it is written? If you can't sell it, what's the use of writing it? Precisely! Let us be quite dreadfully frank and even cynical, at least *entre nous*; since we will never dare luxuriate in frankness and cynicism with readers.

Honestly I *don't* think that you can sell your first story to the *Saturday Evening Post*. There are many reasons why you probably can't; more of which we will go into later. One reason is that their regular writers can easily sell them the most abominable tripe ever seen, where you would have the very devil of a time selling them a really fine story. There are sound reasons for this;

far sounder than you suspect, and the editor is not at all to be blamed. Suppose you just take my word for it, for the time being, that it is useless for you to aim your first story at the highest paying mediums in the United States.

Your first story, if you are not to be discouraged by repeated failure at the outset, should be aimed low, and it should be short. Some writers think it is a mistake to sign one's own name to one's first stories, sold to cheap magazines. This is a controversial matter, and I shall state only my opinion. I think it is a mistake not to sign one's own name to them. Most of the "Big Name" commercial writers in this country started out (in the past two or three decades) in cheap magazines, writing under their own names. So far as I have ever been able to tell, it hasn't made the slightest difference in their later experiences.

Nowadays even the average cheap magazine market is circumscribed as to requirements. A magazine coming out once a month, using from ten to a dozen stories, obviously doesn't need many stories. Their editors do a lot of picking over in buying those few stories. Let us, instead, plan your first story for that market where your chances of acceptance will be greatest. Strangely enough, to see one's first stories in print, no matter how very bad they are, and no matter how very bad the medium in which they appear, and no matter how poor the pay, does something psychic that cannot be equaled by any amount of personally apprehended improvement in unpublished writing.

The markets you would be most likely to sell with your first stories are the syndicate markets. These are listed in all of the writer's magazines, and I refer you to those magazines for such lists rather than take up space here with them.

You will find a great many syndicates listed; only a few of them (about twenty) take short stories from free lance writers for original runs. (Most of the short stories syndicates buy are "reprint" stories, bought from English or American magazines.)

Of these twenty, about six take what have come to be called "short," short stories, or tabloid stories. Of these six, two take an enormous number of tabloid stories, and are always on the lookout for the work of new writers. Not because, as their editors will blandly tell you, they wish to encourage young writers, but because they can get the work of new writers cheaply. They are constantly matriculating freshmen and these beginners —the best of them—soon graduate to better paying markets. Hold tight to your seat: these syndicate markets will pay only from five to ten dollars apiece for short, short stories.

Why then, you say, write at all?

And I shall come right back at you with:

"Why indeed?

"But you *had* decided to write, you know; so don't blame me for telling you the truth about writing."

Granted that the money you will receive at first from such writing is negligible, remember what was said at

the outset about doctors and lawyers and metaphysicians. You, while you learn to practice your profession, can be paid a bit for it, instead of having to pay for instruction, as any professional man or woman in any other line would expect to do. Unless you have "genius" (whatever that is) or unusual knack, or a "drag," the best I can guarantee you to begin with is these syndicate markets. And I don't guarantee you those unless you work very hard; if you are turning to writing to escape hard work there is utterly no hope for you—it is far harder than any other work of which I have any knowledge.

During my first years of writing I sold several hundred tabloid syndicate stories. The total amount I received for them was trifling; but it was excellent training, of a sort. Before I quit writing for syndicate markets altogether, because I found other markets, I got to the point where I could write six tabloid syndicate stories in a day, one right after the other, taking about twenty minutes to each. One day each week I devoted to this. This paid most of my writing expenses, along with an occasional sale elsewhere, so that I could quit the regular employment I then had and become a free lance writer, the which I have precariously remained.

Now we have decided what sort of story you are to write, and what sort of market you are to try for. The matter of length remains.

One thousand words is a good average length for "short," short, tabloid stories. O. Henry's best one, the

one about the wife who sold her hair to buy her husband a watch chain, while the husband sold his watch to buy her a comb, is only nine hundred words long. Many good short, short stories are five hundred words long, and even less.

I am very much afraid that if you try to write a seven thousand word short story which is to be submitted to "slick paper" magazines, you may be sadly disappointed; but I am sure that if you write a one thousand word short story and submit it to several syndicates, unless it is either a hopelessly good story, or a hopelessly bad one, you will eventually sell it in syndicate quarters. Having sold it, you will get a check huge in physical dimensions. It will be upon thick paper. The edges will be jagged and sharp enough to saw with. Upon the check will be the authentic autographs of the president of the syndicate, the vice president, the treasurer, the secretary, the editor, the associate editor, and the associate editor's secretary. The signatures will be executed with flourish, in heavy green and purple ink contained in huge red fountain pens. The paper upon which the check is written will probably be green, with water waves in it; these latter to keep you from raising the sum indicated from five dollars to five hundred dollars. The sight of that check will lift you out of all proportion to the facts. It will do something to you that is, at the start of your writing experience, psychologically invaluable.

More, the syndicate will have your story published in

a great many newspapers throughout the United States. Aunt Maymie will write you from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, to say that she saw your story in her home town paper and was simply thrilled to death. Perhaps she will drop in to see the local editor, under the impression that he bought the story direct from you. In this event she will have told him what a fine person you are; how well you did at school—how excellent was your deportment upon that day when, looking so sweet all in white, you were confirmed. She may go farther and inform you that since she has done this, thus, she is certain, heightening your auctorial standing, you ought in plain justice to be willing to loan her enough to lift the second mortgage on the electric clock. Yes, it will all be very thrilling. Of you your friends will say, with that awed catch in their voices:

"He Writes!"

After you have heard that said for about fifteen years you will probably echo to yourself inwardly:

"So what!"

. . . But to get back to particulars.

Your first story, let us decide, is to be a love story, for a syndicate market. Its length will be one thousand words. (A few words more or less, of course, makes no difference.)

The next step is to get hold of a series of stories run by the syndicate to which you intend submitting. These you can locate in a newspaper that subscribes to the syndicate's output.

This brings us hard upon the subject of "slanting." (Which will be exhaustively treated in the chapter on style.)

"Slanting" is another obfuscated editorial word which means only that editors wish you to write for them the sort of stories they have been using.

Whether or not this is a good thing to do is a much mooted question, with violent partisans in all branches of the free lance commercial writing racket.

Some there are who say that this slanting accounts for the fact that readers switch frequently from one publication to another.

But for the time being, until the slanting battle is fought to a finish, you will certainly have to slant your work.

In the various writer's magazines you will read much about slanting . . . as though it were a most difficult thing to achieve. It would be a perplexing thing if you tried *consciously* to do it. If you do it subconsciously, or unconsciously, without strain and overmuch attention to it, you will have no trouble.

When you have a number of stories run by that syndicate to which you hope to contribute, read them. If you have only a few, read them over two or three times. Then, when you start to write your first story you will slant it toward the editor whose published stories you have read, *even if you try not to.* . . . That is, you will, if you write your syndicate story shortly

after having read the other syndicate stories, and certainly without reading anything else in between.

But, I can hear you asking, what are you to do with a slanted story if it comes back from the market for which it was intended?

The fact is, that in the case of many magazines, you will have to rewrite stories and change their slants when receiving them back from one magazine and before sending them to another. But in the case of syndicates supplying newspapers, a story slanted toward one syndicate editor will often sell without change to another. This is because syndicate editors are not as exacting as magazine editors. They have many more stories to buy, pay less for them, and are much pleased to get a story that they can use.

Your slanted, thousand word syndicate love story may be sent to half a dozen syndicate editorial offices without changing its slant.

In reading over the syndicate stories appertaining to the syndicate to which you wish to submit, you should have gotten a rough idea as to the type of plot the editor of that syndicate wants fitted into the old love story formula. . . . And there nobody can really help you. All I can do is to outline my way of producing as many as six salable plots for syndicate stories as fast as I could write them.

I sketched in my hero and heroine; put them both into a seemingly impossible situation, to which I did not know the solution; and, with my characters thus placed,

sat back for a minute to cogitate upon some way to extricate them in a manner that would surprise, or at least thoroughly satisfy the reader. Nine times out of ten I succeeded.

In your first thousand word syndicate story, characterization will be of no consequence. Your complication will be closely scrutinized by the editor as to its degree of novelty.

The presence or lack of valid suspense surrounding the complication leading to the ending will also move the editor toward accepting or rejecting your story.

If you cannot write plain and correct English, you are very naughty to try to write for publication at all. It is as bad a *faux pas* as to attempt to practice medicine without a knowledge of the circulation of the blood. But don't worry about it. Very few authors can write English; I can't, and it has never interfered with my making a living as a free lance author. Professors who write perfect English are the worst writers in the world. I say this not with any malicious intent further to bedevil the intellectually superior professoriat, but merely to hearten you. It is the *idea* that counts; not the syntax.

Of course, as you write along with your first thousand word syndicate love story, it will seem to you almost incredibly bad. This will be partly because of the strange effect of print. Could you have read, in manuscript, those other syndicate stories from which you got your slant, they would have seemed to you far worse than what you write.

No matter how bad your story seems to you, when you see it in print, you will be astonished to find that it reads ever so much better. You will be incredulous. You will decide, with a blush, that the editor rewrote it. You will, perhaps, check up from your carbon copy; and you will discover that the editor did not rewrite it. Syndicate editors are too busy to rewrite anything, and they know that the level of writing in the average newspaper is so low that anything more than faint coherence can comfortably be damned, along with grammar and rhetoric.

If you have come to writing with anything but a goofy desire to see your name in print and make some easy money without any work; if you have come to it with the determination to write and sell what you write, you certainly will—nothing but your own laziness will prevent you. No amount of stupidity will prevent you from writing to sell; no amount of ignorance. A total lack of all inspiration will have, if anything, a cash value for you as a writer. Writing fiction for commercial publication is not a bit different from writing advertising copy. The fiction is used to attract the attention of readers to advertisements placed next to the fiction. The fiction must attract the sort of persons who would be likely to act upon the advertisements. Read the advertisements, and you will see at once for what type of mentality you must write. The only real difference between commercial fiction and advertising

copy is that it is harder to write the fiction because it is longer.

For Heaven's sake do not try to evaluate your own story when you have finished it. No writer, especially no beginning writer, can possibly evaluate his own work; nor can it be intelligently evaluated by your parents, your minister, your school superintendent, or your warden. Let the editor evaluate it. And while you are waiting, write more thousand word love stories for syndicates; get as many as you can into the mail, to as many different syndicates as possible. If, when the first two or three come back, you are completely floored, you will be picked up again when the fifth or sixth out finally sells. Writing more of them—one a day—will begin to give you a certain facility, so that even if all five or six are rejected, by the time the last one has come back you will have still more in the mail, and so on *ad infinitum* . . . granting you have real determination to write to sell; and if you have that you *will* eventually sell, even if you are a low grade moron.

And then a strange and defeating thing will certainly happen. You will have sold your first story. You will have worked up a degree of facility which brings you almost happily to the typewriter each day. You will have decided that the world is yours and everything is lovely . . . and then that queer thing some authors call "mental becalmment" will settle down upon you. You'll go to the typewriter some morning to feel that your brain will not work at all; the thing will be, in

all likelihood, so dreadful, that there will be physiological manifestations. Your hands will feel stiff and numb. It is one of the most baffling and defeating of the various psychological phenomena known to the writing racket. And it means, precisely, nothing.

I mean that quite literally. If, on that fatal morning, you force yourself to write anyway, no matter what agony it may seem, you will discover, months later, when what you have written is printed, that it is no worse than your average run of work, though, at the time, you thought it was sheer gibberish.

If you are defeated on that first morning when this psychological phenomenon occurs, you will establish what the behaviorist psychologists call a "conditioning" toward the "becalmment" which will cause it to appear more and more frequently. If you override it, it will appear less and less frequently; though it will *never* totally disappear. I am not sure what causes it, any more than doctors are sure what causes "migraine." But I believe in treating it as Doctor Clendening says the Greeks treated migraine: "With contempt." I suspect that it is predicated upon laziness.

If you cannot override the thing, I can tell you a way to overcome it artificially, though of course the Right Thinking who read this will be shocked; even if there is no real reason why they should be.

It is possible to obtain, without prescription, at any drugstore, what are called "caffeine tablets." These are not, to my certain knowledge, habit forming; they are,

unless, perhaps, one have something wrong with the heart, absolutely harmless. They are inexpensive. You will have to adjust yourself to them by finding out how many you need to overcome the feeling of mental and physical numbness; but they will overcome it beautifully, when you find out the proper dose. It would be unwise to take more than two, at the most, the first time, if they are of average strength; *one* would be safer. In different parts of the United States these tablets are put up in varying degrees of strength; care should be taken to ascertain from the druggist what dosage is absolutely harmless.

Much the same effect can be obtained by drinking four or five cups of coffee; but who wants to slop down all that coffee? It would be impossible to sit still and write afterward.

Alcohol will usually exaggerate the condition; it is a soporific with some and an aphrodisiac with others. If it acts in its first capacity with you the results, so far as the blank page of paper is concerned, will be negative; and if it acts in its second capacity, you will still not be able to remain quietly seated.

When I get that "mental becalmment" feeling, with the accompanying strange slight numbness of the hands, I usually go ahead and write anyway. . . . It is probably best not to resort to the caffeine tablets any more than necessary; but if I am in a hurry, I use them.

And now I see utterly no reason why you can't cover

at least four or five pages of that blank white paper with a thousand word love story for a syndicate market. If you can't, be assured the fault is yours; I have told you all that any writer could to help you. After all, you know, you must do some of this yourself.

chapter--

II

REVISION

"I lost everything at Philippi, and took to poetry to make a living, but now I have a competence I should be mad if I did not prefer ease to writing."

HORACE

AND NOW THAT YOU HAVE YOUR FIRST little story done, you come smack up against another one of the much mooted questions involved in the writing either of belles lettres, or commercial fiction in the writing racket.

What did you do? Slap the story upon paper, thinking to yourself: "It doesn't make any difference how I write *this*; this is only the first draft."

The matter is debatable and there is such a wide divergence of opinion concerning revision that I will only explain why I do not rewrite.

In the first place, if you are going to write belles lettres—and Heaven only knows what you will do with them after they're written if you do—you are

supposed to go into something resembling an epileptic fit . . . the sort of thing the old Begatters in the Bible used to go into when they were bent upon turning snakes into sticks and *vice versa*; but in the free lance commercial fiction racket, you don't have time for any fits, spiritual or otherwise—you go into production. And you'll find, after a time, when you have really learned to produce, that first draft writing is the only kind upon which you can take a real profit.

If you begin by writing everything loosely, and revising it afterward, you will end by writing it ten times as loosely, and revising it fifty times afterward. The habit is always progressive. I speak here not only out of my own experience, but from observation of my writing friends. If you get the revision habit, after you have practised it long enough, you won't be able to write even a note to the milk man, telling him you'll *surely* pay him Saturday if he'll leave another quart today, without revising it several times.

If you write a first draft which you are going to send to the editor immediately it is finished, you will grow more and more careful as time goes on. Of course, some redaction will always be necessary. When I do a novel, I write it from beginning to end on the paper that will go to the harassed publisher when I have written "The End." This done I turn with lamentations back to page one and begin to reread.

As I read I find numerous errors of various sorts which I correct with an eraser. When a page gets to

the point where an editor will be unable to tell whether it was written with an eraser and corrected with a typewriter, or written with a typewriter and corrected with an eraser, I rewrite the whole page. Sometimes I do over whole chapters; but never the entire book. As a result, I find myself becoming ever more careful in my writing. I have at last reached the stage where a reasonably patient person can often puzzle out what I am trying to say without insurmountable difficulty.

Nevertheless, perhaps we shall wholly rewrite your *first* short story after all. (I wanted you to get it written without too many restrictions in order not to discourage you at the outset.)

One of the silliest things reiterated by those who teach short story writing is that every short story has a "Beginning," a "Middle" and an "End." This is like informing automotive internal combustion engineering students that every automobile has a front, a back, and two sides.

However, it is true that every short story has a beginning, an end and a middle. The trouble with most first short stories is that they have their beginnings buried in their middles. Take up the thousand word short story you have written and read down until you come to the first dialogue or objective action.

Now, start reading all over again, beginning the story as though that first bit of action or dialogue were the start of the story. Read along for two or three hundred words while the action and dialogue continue,

until you come to the point where you have again resorted to expository writing—that is, to telling the reader something, rather than to portraying the material in narrative or dramatic form. At this point, insert all of that material which went before the first action or dialogue. Write an additional sentence or two of transition, in between the dialogue and action section and the expository section. Retype the story, with the middle at the beginning, the beginning in the middle, and the ending where it was in the first place. Now you need no longer wail, "But I don't know how to *start* a story!" Even if you never learn how you can always get a good start by, after you have written into the story, arbitrarily yanking out a good beginning somewhere and putting it at the start of the story.

My delineation, as to this replacing of the middle of a story with the beginning, is involved, I know; but it will be made perfectly clear if you will pick up the nearest "slick paper" magazine to hand and, opening to the first story written by one of the veteran trained seals of commercial fiction, note how the story begins with action and dialogue, continues on until the reader is firmly hooked, and then "cuts back" to expository matter: the bringing up of background, atmosphere, characterization, etc. Many writers habitually write their stories as you probably just wrote your first one, introducing the characters and background, then leading to action and dialogue; afterward transposing the whole before the final draft, adding a sentence of transi-

tion, and retyping. A far better way is to remember to write the middle of the story at the beginning, and the beginning in the middle. The transition sentences or, at most, paragraphs, will, at first, give you considerable unnecessary trouble. This will be not because there is anything really wrong with them, but merely because the beginning writer is persuaded that the reader will see something wrong with abrupt transitions.

Two of the most frequent plaints heard by college instructors of short story are that it is impossible to "begin" the story, and impossible to get the characters from one room to another, one day to another, without abrupt breaks. The teacher, if he knows anything at all, patiently explains that the way to begin a story is to plunge into the middle of it, either with dialogue, or an action or movement of some kind; and that the way to get characters from one scene to another and one day to another is simply to yank them bodily without any clumsy grappling around for unnecessary wordage to fill in the transition. I have written a lot of stories, but it still seems to me, when I take a character abruptly from one scene to another, that the reader will be confused. Of course, nothing of the sort happens. The reader does not notice the transition any more than you notice them when you read the stories of other writers. Think, for instance, of the last story you read; see if you can remember once having been bewildered by such a transition. You won't have been. Go back and dig the story out from under the pile of magazines in the

woodshed and read it again. You will see the most abrupt imaginable sort of transitions in it, which you did not notice at all when first you read it. The worst kind of transition is the redundant sort that goes:

"January faded into February, and February, in its turn, fainted into March; March came in like a lion, and crept out like a wounded billy goat; and now it was April. Sweet gentle April, with its locust storms . . ." and so on. Nobody but a tyro or a college professor of literature ever writes transition bits of that sort. . . . But the temptation to write them is almost overpowering and one never gets over it. Please forgive me for calling your attention to the First Chapter of Genesis. *There* is transition in its most perfect form. A composition teacher would have used up three million words covering the transitions in the First Chapter of Genesis and had both God and the reader all worn out before he came to the Seventh Day.

Of course, many writers in the commercial fiction racket no longer have to use the middle of their stories as the beginning. Their names have become so widely acceptable that they can put the beginning where it belongs and leave it there; but that is a luxury which you will not be able to command for a long time to come. . . . I have been writing for many years and I wouldn't dare do it.

As to other matters of revision you will have to make your own individual choice. Perhaps it is true that careful and frequent revision of a work improves it. I

simply do not believe it, but I have good friends who do, as the atheist banker said of his Baptist depositors.

At any rate, there is nothing now left to do about this first story of yours except send it out to try your luck. For goodness' sake do not put a note of any kind in it unless you know the editor to whom you are to send it. If you know someone who has sold the editor, or who has any influence with him, by all means get *him* to put a note in it for you. Let us again be brutally frank and realistic; such a note will often sell a bad story, where a good one would be rejected. Editors are human beings, after all. Such a note has the same force with an editor that a note of introduction to a boss has, held by one seeking a position. However, it is perfectly possible—though certainly much harder—to sell without any sort of introduction or "drag." It was two years after I started to write before I met another writer or an editor, and I sold a good many very bad short stories in those two years; I could have sold still more and received much more for them, had I known a few editors or other writers.

It is best, if possible, to arrange to send stories off flat, without folding them at all. This of course requires not only very large and expensive envelopes, but usually some sort of cardboard or cardboard folder; if you can afford such luxuries so much the better; if not, a manuscript folded three times will get by just about as well; though it is a nuisance to read them since they spring back into fold every time a page is turned. Nothing

that makes it hard for an editor to read a story is going to help that story's chance of sale; editors are just as lazy as writers.

An envelope stamped and addressed for return should be included with the outgoing envelope.

That is all you need to know about submitting manuscripts to editors . . . all the hog wash about various types of bindings, envelopes, flourishes and what not is employed only by charlatans with something to sell.

chapter - -

III

TABOO

"What there is in all provincial places is an attempt to suppress part of the evidence, to present life out of proportion with itself, squared to fit some local formula of respectability."

EZRA POUND

I MADE THINGS SEEM VERY SIMPLE SO FAR, I hope, in connection with writing your first story.

. . . I cheated a trifle. I did so because it is important that you get one short piece of writing done in order to see that the difficulties are not insurmountable.

One of the chief hazards in the free lance commercial writing racket is the "taboo."

For the aesthetic writer the "taboo" is something with which to defend himself.

I mean, when the aesthetic writer finds himself snubbed even by aesthetic mediums, he can always fall back on "taboos" to excuse himself, and claim that the reason he does not out shell Shelley is that there are too

many subjects upon which he may not write. Naturally it follows—if you are the sort who follows such things with credence naive—that the poor fellow, were he permitted to write about anything he liked, would make even Keats look sicker than it would appear from the evidence Keats usually was.

For the commercial writer the taboo becomes just another element to be taken into consideration as he writes his way from Street and Smith's callow *Love Story Magazine* through other grades of callowness in more pretentious and smugger slick paper magazines, to the very ornate door of the Twentieth Century Fox Studio in Westwood, California.

Unfortunately, in the former editions of Trial and Error, while I was still a virgin, so far as the cinema was concerned, I attributed much of censorship, near and far, to Mr. Will Hays, of the Hollywood Motion Picture Producers Association.

. . . So I can be wrong.

To long suffering Mr. Hays I here apologize; for I have found out that the poor guy who says he began life pumping organs does not inculcate censorship, but fights it with a desperation that is entirely praiseworthy.

On behalf of all the countries in the world not yet out of their intellectual swaddling clothes there is a concerted effort to prevent:

(a) The young from finding out where babies come from.

(b) The old from finding out where they don't come from.

(c) The young and old, male, female and homosexual, from finding out that virtue is not always rewarded with a fat bank account, while moral turpitude is not always rewarded with the electric chair.

During the last three years I have had an intimate knowledge of censorship all over the earth. I mean that numbered among my various valued acquaintances are publicity men working for various major studios here and abroad.

The censorship disgrace is not, typically, an American institution. Some of you will be astonished to know that in China, where they occasionally amuse themselves by picking each other to pieces with hot pincers, they will not pass an American Western Film in which there is "too much shooting."

And (this'll kill you) in Italy they will not pass a film where there is an indication that someone has interfered with "Free Speech."

In California, when one can think of nothing else exciting to do it is customary to drive down to various Mexican "spots," for the week end.

At these spots, for from two bits to two dollars one may see a film wherein one of the most celebrated American motion picture actresses conducts herself in a manner so enticing as to conduce toward convulsions on the part

of the unsaved. But Mexico will censor any picture which depicts *thwarted authority*!

You who dream with luscious longings of such fleshpots of hell as Montevideo, Uruguay or the Canal Zone, where you could become admittedly damned with a maximum of piquancy and a minimum of government supervision, will be surprised to know that in Montevideo, where twelve-year-old virgins can be bought for seventy-five cents, they are shocked to the point of complete suppression by a Hollywood picture which shows a man being smoked up by a firing squad.

. . . And in the Canal Zone where they greet you at the docks with Priapic invitations, a motion picture film which even vaguely hinted of a disease not approved by either the Catholic or the Protestant church would be burned in the Noonday Sun, Englishmen or no Englishmen; and the distributor would be plenty lucky if he didn't get burned with it.

The point I am trying to make is this:

Wherever you go, on the face of the earth, even in utterly free Russia, where everybody is so free they have to nail themselves to the floor to keep from flying up in the air with freedom, you will find taboos.

And wherever you go, wherever you write, if you are an aesthete the thing to do is deeply to deplore these taboos and give them as the excuse why you are not hailed as a genius far and wide.

But if you are a commercial writer, hell bent for pulp, then slick, then the main gate of Twentieth Century

Fox, Westwood, you must consider the thing much more technically and practically.

If the *Saturday Evening Post*, and its competitor, *Love Story Magazine*, were to be fair, they would issue a list of taboos to you, and you, and you; but, alas, all American magazines, all magazines printed in English, or any other language, are shockingly coy about their taboos.

Write them and ask them for a list of taboos and they will calmly tell you (I have their letters) that they have *no* taboos!

I have been writing for a flock of years, and I am a veteran of taboos. I have actually made hundreds of magazines violate their own taboos. And I have caused book publishers to fall from grace by violating their taboos at my insistent and vitriolic request. But it is a losing game.

. . . Because the taboos do not come from editors, publishers, or motion picture producers, but from Men in Power.

Right and Wrong, Good and Bad, Better and Worse, are all abstract terms. Tracing the terms through history, and imaginatively projecting them into the hectic years to come we find that there is no common ground, no certain mensuration upon which we can constructively build a definite apperception of the taboo menace to the commercial writer.

Tracing the taboo back into history, and bringing it forward imaginatively into the history to be written, you will always find the "Men in Power," back of it.

Sometimes it is the old men of the church; sometimes it is the old men of the state; but always it is the men who, at the head of church, or state, are getting a "take" by keeping certain things from being written.

We have, for instance, in this connection, the amazing spectacle of the former Prince of Wales, bowed to by the Church of England so long as he kept things all quiet on the various fronts; but vilified and ostracized by these ludicrous holy dervishes the moment he wished to do right by the gal.

That, in short, is censorship; that, *multum in parvo,* is taboo. It has nothing to do with right or wrong, good or bad—and it has everything to do with whatever old men are in power in whatever country one may be writing in whatever the age past, present and future.

When old men head church or state they live in comfort and luxury. And they do not intend to let this comfort and luxury be disrupted by young men who wish to yelp what they consider Truth at the top of their voices.

Find these old men in whatever state or country you write. Study what will most charm them in the way of speciously written commercial tales and you will prosper.

. . . But when you get the notion into your head that you want to expose them, and thwart them, and annoy them, in their various profitable enterprises, sacred and secular, then, my friends, you will be banished from Lesbos if you are Sappho, or you will go on the W. P. A.

if you are any one of fifty very fine writers now living today whom I could name.

However, if I were here sedulously to outline all of the things at which editors shy, and describe how to go about camouflaging those things in the transcendental Hays manner, it would take many pages; much easier it will be to outline just a few taboos and then go on with what is thoroughly safe to write.

Unfortunately, you will have to learn about taboos in "literature" just as you learn about them in life, by the trial and error method; for there are nowhere any hard and fast rules. That which is strictly taboo with one editor may not be so with another.

In general, the greatest single taboo is the religious one. "Christians" are seldom charitable or tolerant of viewpoints in conflict with their own. Not one percent of all the periodicals published in the United States fail to stand in deadly terror of the religious taboo. It is almost unbelievable what letters "Christians" will write to editors and authors who violate this taboo. Letters filled with the odor of witches burning at the stake; the ducking stool, the pillory.

The tone of this book is wholly and completely taboo; especially where, in this chapter, I point out the narrow-mindedness and intolerance of Christians. As I revise this chapter I find a note from even my very daring publisher that I better soft-pedal this, even in a book on writing for writers.

But I have defied him and not taken out the reference.

Surely, in writing to writers, if anywhere, one may depart from the inanities of social and religious convention. A book upon writing, intended for the perusal of writers, is much different from short stories intended for the perusal of morons who are supposed to support the publications in which the stories appear by buying the idiotic things in the advertisements in these magazines.

So please, gentle reader, if you are a Christian, and have a narrow mind, take it to church; do not take it to the pages of a book on writing intended not for the general public, but for writers.

Such a periodical as the *Forum Magazine* will, at rare intervals, very cautiously take a chance on the religious taboo. This is not because the editor wishes courageously to come out for freedom of the pen. No publisher cares—despite overmuch protestation—for anything so abstract.

All magazines are published and edited with a view to securing as much advertising as possible. Upon the amount of advertising secured depends the editor's salary . . . his very job, in fact. *The Forum,* for instance, will run what looks like a very dangerously disputatious article touching upon the advantages of marrying or not marrying a Catholic. The editor very well knows when he does such a thing that he is taking a long gambling chance. He is betting that the number of canceled subscriptions and canceled advertising contracts resulting from such daring will be greatly ex-

ceeded by the increase in circulation resultant from the average Catholic's curiosity facing such a sensational theme.

On the particular case I have in mind, the Catholic articles run by the *Forum* sold out every copy of the magazine for the months in which they appeared; so that if a number of canceled subscriptions and advertising contracts resulted, the editor nevertheless came out with a nice winning margin on his gambling chance. That, my friends, I assure you solemnly, is as near as any American magazine editor, whose periodical pays its contributors at all well, and that carries a respectable amount of advertising, ever comes to being daring.

The *Saturday Evening Post*, and all slick paper magazines, are absolutely craven touching the various taboos. Let me quote to you, in this connection, a delicious bit by George Jean Nathan, contained in his interesting volume "The World in Falseface." (Knopf.)*

"George Horace Lorimer, of the *Saturday Evening Post*, is America's greatest commercial editor. In the entire field of the periodicals there is no editor who can tell so exactly how good a piece of literature it is safe to print without irritating the advertising agent for Stein-Bloch clothes and how bad a piece it is safe to print in order to tickle him. It is this extraordinarily dexterous mid-channel piloting that has made Lorimer's

* This passage by Mr. Nathan was written before Mr. Lorimer's retirement.

journal what it is, the most successful magazine, financially, in the country. Probably not more than two or three times in the last five years has Lorimer run the risk of printing an incontrovertibly first-rate piece of writing. But, also, probably not more than two or three times in the same period has he run the lesser, but still dangerous, risk of printing a story absolutely and utterly inexcusable. He takes no chances. He obeys the traffic rules as strictly as a baby carriage, and with much the same wistful persuasiveness. Does even one of the favorite houris of his harem do a piece, however good, that might perchance jar the nervous system of Little Miss Vivienne Senfgurken, third daughter to August Senfgurken, Fancy Delicatessen, Main and Poplar Streets, Gubyville, Mo., then does he bid the enfant gaté to sell the piece to Munsey. . . . A two million circulation, like the buzz-saw, is something not to be monkeyed with. To give it a philosophy not concurred in by the Inter-Church Movement and the owner of the Silver Dollar Cafe alike is to court disaster. A two million circulation must have its constant assurance that there is a heaven, that thousands of blind, one-legged newsboys have become bank presidents through their sheer indomitable will, that marriage is the beginning of all happiness, and that it is as great an honor to be superintendent of the Excelsior Suspender Company as to have composed 'Tristan and Isolde.' Of this technique, Lorimer is a veritable Houdini. And he has gradually gathered around him a corps of cosmic back slappers, joy spreaders, baby-kissers and

gloom perfumers whose pens obediently jump through and lie down at the crack of his golden whip. Some of these pens are of a very considerable intrinsic merit; some of them may be detected in the act of chuckling between the lines while they pocket the easy money. But others, the majority, are the hack pens of the hack magazines, graduated with the degree of L. s. d. It is upon these latter unimaginative pens that the sagacious Lorimer, realizing the truth of the adage 'Set a boob to catch a boob,' chiefly depends. George Moore, Anatole France and Joseph Conrad compose a less effective triumvirate for the galvanism of Terre Haute and the Campbell Soup advertisement than John Fleming Wilson, H. C. Witwer and Octavus Roy Cohen."

And all of what Mr. Nathan so wittily says is perfectly true. It is also true that the editor would be a great fool to edit the *Saturday Evening Post* in any other way. By editing it that way he makes the maximum amount of money possible; and, in America, money is all that matters; let us be quite frank with ourselves about that. By editing the *Post* in that fashion, any editor is able to pay his gifted artists larger honorariums than he could if he were more frank and honest with his readers. That there is virtue in such a typically American arrangement nobody with even the quarter of a wit for one moment argues; but until the American millions of boobs, thus exploited, rise up and destroy their exploiters, that is the sort of system with which the free lance author must work; and I would strongly

advise—though there is room for disagreement here—that he work with it complacently, leaving Upton Sinclair to do the moaning. (See Mr. Sinclair's book, "Money Writes.")

Neglecting the specific taboos then, because they are so varied, and have different weights in different publishing quarters, we arrive at the rough and ready generalization that the most easily salable story leaves out all controversial matters, ends happily, and "perfumes away all gloom."

The average young writer feels impelled to write of death. His characters are always dying in the end. This is very, very bad; and it is naïve. The easiest possible way to extricate a character from an impossible situation is to drown him. Don't, if you want to make money.

The cheap syndicate markets, while they will allow a great deal of latitude in other directions, will allow none whatever concerning the taboos. Much of the competition you will have in this quarter will be on the part of young writers who have characters in their stories dying of cancer, or being converted or unconverted to or from some religion; or bitten by snakes (snakes are taboo in most quarters, though occasionally a snake story can be sold). In many of these competition stories the lovers will not get married in the end; they will do as lovers so frequently do in life. Keep such disappointing material out of your stories and you will mow down dilettante competition. A really great, short, short story would have no chance whatever in a

syndicate market if the leading character in it went gloomily insane; while the shallowest and most obviously poor story you could write would have an excellent chance of acceptance, if it perfumed away gloom.

Yes, yes, I know, the news columns of the papers in which these stories appear are filled with murder, rapine and divorce; there seems to be a glaring inconsistency then in filling the syndicate fiction intended for such newspapers with sweetness and light. There *is* glaring inconsistency. But if an editor insists upon being inconsistent there is simply nothing you can do about it.

I hope that you will not conclude from what I have said that you must, for short syndicate fiction, write material that is utterly improbable and unconvincing. Your first job in relation to these taboos will be to learn to avoid them and write of sweetness and light with some appearance of plausibility. If I were to attempt to set forth here how you are to arrive at plausibility with such a handicap, it would take many pages, and I might not even then succeed. Fortunately this is unnecessary; turn back to your clippings of syndicate stories and reread them now in view of what I have told you; see how the authors who sell arrive at this counterfeit plausibility. And remember, in directing you to read published material for "slants," I most positively do not mean that you are to borrow plot situations, bits of character business, or other things of that sort from these stories. To borrow even a small part of such material from the work of another author is plagiarism,

literary theft. While you won't be arrested for it, your possible career as a free lance writer will be definitely arrested the moment you attempt it. You'll get caught at it no matter how carefully you disguise the theft. Don't try it. Aside from the surety of editors catching you at it immediately, it will prevent the development of your imagination.

chapter --

IV

IDEAS

"For each letter from a creditor, write fifty lines on an abstract subject, and you are saved."

BAUDELAIRE

AUTHORS WHO MAKE A LIVING IN THE commercial writing racket often have the desire to maim. Usually this desire comes when they hear yet again the question:

"But where do you get your ideas?"

The average commercial raconteur never had any ideas, never will have any, and would only be discommoded by them. There are men and women who have been writing the same first person "Confession" story over and over again, with, of course, variations, for years; they have never written any other story, and will probably never need to. There are writers of western stories, detective stories, sex stories, who never had but one idea for a story, the which they borrowed somewhere. This they write over and over with infinite

variations; far from being offended at this, their editors would be confused and angered if they used a new story formula. I cannot tell you how many millions of dollars have been paid to the writers of western stories for this one story:

A cowpuncher, temporarily detached from any outfit, wanders, upon his trusty horse, into a ranch he has never seen or heard of before. He gets a job on the ranch. The ranch owner has a beautiful daughter who is in love with the ranch foreman. The ranch foreman is secretly a rustler. The wandering cowherd discovers this fact. He also discovers, whether it is a fact or not, that he is in love with the ranch owner's daughter. From the first the reader has seen that the wandering cowherd ought to fall in love with the ranch owner's daughter; and the reader has seen that the ranch owner's daughter ought to fall in love with the wandering cowherd.

When they do fall in love, the cowherd sets out to undo the scoundrelly ranch foreman. Of course he succeeds in the end and marries the ranch owner's daughter; but, before the end (complication and suspense, or, if you will, sadism), he almost gets hanged for a thief himself.

Incredible as it may seem, you will still find that story, with all sorts of variations, in most of the western magazines. For years and years you will still find it. Why this should be I do not know. I suspect that it is because American readers are far more stupid than any

other sort of readers; there is wide disagreement as to this, however, and I merely state my own opinion.

If you were to use the western story formula I have just given, you would not be plagiarizing anything. Almost all general story formulas are made use of by all commercial fiction writers as from a common treasury. This is perfectly legitimate; it is when you borrow the variations upon the details of the formulas that you get instantly into trouble and impair your own growing imaginative faculties.

The chances are—and I am writing of you as a beginner—you won't suffer from a lack of ideas for stories; you will suffer from entirely too many unconventional and fresh ideas for stories. Most of them, as they occur to you, will be old ideas; you will think they are new because you never saw them in print before. They have not been in print because they are taboo in some way, you may be sure of that—with, of course, an occasional exception.

Some of these story formulas that all authors have used as common property for years are pretty well chewed up; so much so, in fact, that it is unwise to use them any longer. One of the oldest "crook" story formulas is this one—and if I were you I wouldn't use it, though you will, at rare intervals, still see it in various forms in periodicals. Every editor is accustomed to seeing this story come to him in the mails at least once a month. It goes somewhat in the following manner, with variations and interpolations:

A stranger goes to a small town and so gains the confidence of a local jeweler as to get him to accept his check for a piece of jewelry, after the banks have closed on Saturday afternoon.

Having bought the piece of jewelry, he takes it down the street to a place where he knows what he does will get back to the jeweler, and attempts to sell the valuable article for a fraction of its cost.

The jeweler, hearing of this, is sure that the check is bad. He has his customer arrested; and, lacking bail, the man is held in jail until the banks open Monday morning, when it is found that the check which he gave to the jeweler is perfectly good. He is released and sues the jeweler.

Another story formula that every editor sees at least once a week, and which few editors will use any more in any form or with any variation, goes something like this:

A girl suffering from what a Methodist would call moral turpitude goes to the hotel room of a Babbitt and in some way gains admittance.

When the door has been shut for several minutes she jerks off her panties and screams bloody murder. People rush in and she declares that the Babbitt has attempted to rape her (hoping by this to force him to a big cash settlement in order to get her to dismiss charges against him).

The Babbitt, remaining quietly in his chair unperturbed, holds up the cigarette which he has been smok-

ing, upon which there is half an inch of ash . . . which proves that he could not possibly have snatched off her panties during the past few minutes.

An occasional green editor will still take this story in one form or another; but it is unwise to waste time on it no matter what innovation for the formula you may have conceived.

On the other hand, there is no plot older to hack literature than the "Badger Game" idea; it is far older and more worn than any of the other plots I have outlined above; yet you can sell it, still, with deviations. The badger game, of course, surrounds the idea of a woman submitting to a man, whereupon her husband, or fake husband, enters, threatens her lover and shakes him down for cash.

So, you see, there is no hard and fast rule; you'll have to find out for yourself, by trial and error, which formulas are still good and which are not; some of the newer ones are already passé, while some of the older ones are still good; and there is no way of putting any rhyme or reason into the situation. You could read all of the books ever written on writing and still not know; and if I were to devote an hundred thousand word volume to what formulas may be used and with what modifications, and what ones may not be used, I would only have scratched the surface of the problem.

The oldest and best formula, and the most hackneyed in the world is the "Cinderella" story. Everyone read the story of Cinderella at one time or another in early

youth; yet if you will turn to the pages of any popular magazine today you will find the story of Cinderella yet again perpetrated at least once in its pages, and possibly half a dozen times. If you want to make a good steady living in the free lance fiction racket for life, just confine yourself to that one story, the Cinderella story. Editors will learn to love you far more thus, than if you suddenly and frequently spring upon them strange and new and untried story formulas.

Like all writers I am constantly receiving letters, forwarded to me by magazines, from people who have an "idea" for a story. Almost invariably these ideas for stories are pretty good; often they are superb; but they are almost always useless because they contain various taboos. Here is an excellent example in a letter I received from my mother:

"Dear Son: Please look over the enclosed and see if you can put it into some form which *Liberty* might consider. It embodies an experience had by two women, one of them old—she didn't kill herself—and one of them young; the young one killed herself. I can see the sign where the girl died from my window. Not far to the East is the tower of the Presbyterian Church, half way up the hill upon which is the sign. I have ideas, but no form of expression to put them into. Maybe you can make something out of this story."

. . . And here is the story she sent me, in my mother's own words: (Reading time thirty seconds.)

"Dora Elliott looked up for the thousandth time at

the twinkling sign 'Thousand Oaks' high upon the hillside. It looked small from below; but it was really gigantic.

The sign was at the crest of the hill, dominating the city below. Each letter in the sign was fifty feet high, and blazing with electricity.

For days Dora had tramped the streets of Hollywood, waiting for a call to do extra work from the Central Casting Bureau.

There was no one, no intimate whom she could speak to about her ambitions, her loneliness, and lack of a place to sleep that night.

Of course there were charitable institutions; but only a Hollywood extra girl could know what it meant to try to get help from them.

Alone, she climbed the hill, toward the place beneath the enormous sign where she loved to sit and think and look around at the vast panorama below.

Half way up the hill was the church. An impulse took her in. Ministers, she thought, are spiritual advisers. I will go to the minister and talk to him, he will tell me what he thinks of my problems.

Up the steps she walked, into the tower entrance, up other steps to the lobby—to a door marked 'Office,' which was locked.

A rather severe elderly woman appeared at a window that had an iron grill; within was a stenographer at her typewriter. There was another office marked 'Manager.'

'What did you want?' asked the one with the iron gray hair.

'I wanted to see the minister,' said the girl.

'Put your name and address and telephone number on this card and state your business.'

With visions of the Silent One with outstretched hands, saying, 'Come Unto Me,' she turned away from the gospel factory—climbed the long hill, climbed to the top of the huge letter 'Y' on the electric sign, and jumped."

A story?

You bet your sweet life that's a story. It is the kind of story that people with minds love; it could be written into a beautiful, compelling, vital thing. But after it had been so written I haven't the faintest idea where it could be sold. *Liberty* wouldn't even read through it. Their editors would get to the point where the church is shown up for what most American churches are and at that point stop reading the story.

Of course the thing can be made into a salable fiction story easily enough; but there would be no use in using it for such a purpose; there are too many easily available formulas, far more welcome in editorial offices.

Naturally, to make the story fit for a large periodical, one would eliminate the suicide, and, in the end, the girl would marry the young minister who happened to be lurking up by the sign, because he, too, wanted to get away from all the material efficiency of the church he had just taken over from his predecessor there.

In addition it would be necessary to infer that the predecessor had been let go because of his lacking spirituality; there would have to be the implication that the whole situation was unique and that such secular practicality was almost unheard of and not approved by churches in general. Even then the average editor would be a trifle afraid of it though the story might then be salable.

Don't be discouraged. The situation is not quite as bad as it appears. Think of music. All music is greatly circumscribed. There must be contrapuntal values, placed in a most precise way; there is a *leit motif* in most ambitious musical compositions, which must be handled in a recognized, stereotyped way. Still, there is wide latitude left the musical composer for infinite diversification.

. . . Now, for goodness' sake, don't go around any more asking authors where they get their ideas. You'll embarrass and infuriate them. And don't worry if you haven't got any ideas; you're far better off without them if you are going to write to sell.

Ideas for variations and "bits of business" to be used with formula stories are what you really need; and you won't have the slightest difficulty in finding them. They are everywhere. Once you have started writing you will be conscious of them in a new way. I am not a particularly observant or imaginative person, yet wherever I go, night and day, I find material for "bits of business," as they call such stuff in the free lance racket.

For instance, as I walked back from luncheon some

time ago, and took up this where I left off, I saw an automobile accident. It was a minor one. Nothing much happened, except that the drivers got out of their cars to glare and snarl at each other, waving their arms and using up a lot of time and motion.

It occurred to me that the carburetor on my own car was in shocking condition. I felt it was too bad that one of the cars, which was of the same make as mine, but much newer, hadn't been almost demolished, except for the side upon which the carburetor was situated—in which case I might have bought the carburetor on the other car very cheaply and had it grafted upon my own car.

It then occurred to me that it would have been keen indeed, if the accident had been a worse one, and the owner of the demolished car had been killed; whereupon I might have ascertained his address and hurried around to dicker with the widow over the carburetor. Or, if the man had been only injured I might have gone over and bargained with him on the spot. Imagine his feelings if I *had*. Of course, it is possible to visualize the sort of person who might actually have done such a thing—that is, one having unusual gifts for uncommon *espieglerie*. . . . When you visualized that type of person, a unique character would spring alive in your mind, all lusty and kicking; and the opening incident of the story . . . action . . . dialogue, everything, would be there. I know from experience that it would be a whale of an opening, for sales purposes, providing

nobody was seriously injured. (Very bad automobile accidents in which people are messily killed are taboo in magazines that carry lots of automobile advertising.) Then, after that opening, all I'd need would be to hash in the beautiful girl somewhere, show that she ought to be in love with the aggressive and very good-looking young man who bargained for the carburetor. Five hundred words later she *is* in love with him; but her father is the man who was slightly injured in the automobile accident. He has taken a very decided dislike to the young man who so unfeelingly inquired after his carburetor instead of after the condition of his spine. It would be called a "light young love story." There would be a mild complication, with, possibly, a rival; a minimum of sadism in the way of suspense, and a clutch at the end.

Such incidents are *always* under a writer's nose. Observing or not he can't possibly miss them; after he has written for awhile they immediately spring into formula shape. There is a vast division of opinion as to whether or not they ought to be recorded and kept on file. I favor the negative school. I used to record them and keep them on file; and I found that I never hunted for old ones but always had new ones at hand.

We are still, you see, on the subject of those thousand word love tabloid stories for syndicates. I wanted to cover every possible phase of writing them, because I know from not only my own, but the experience of several other established free lance writers that they are

a very real "easy" way into the commercial fiction writing racket.

If you can't write a number of such little thousand word stories now you are hopeless. Take a course in saxophone playing by mail instead of fooling any more with this book.

But if you can and have written at least one, try to go on until you have written a dozen or so, at least, and keep them all in the mails constantly. Many, many stories are sold upon the twentieth or fiftieth submission. Soon you'll have a floating stock of them in the mails and the law of averages will be on your side; you'll begin to sell. Remember, nothing counts but the determination to write to sell; if you really have that you'll get by—there's not the slightest question of that.

Before we leave the tabloid story altogether and go into the next step for the beginning writer (at least in my opinion) let me take brief space to point out that the market for very short stories is constantly on the increase. You will find an infinite number of places to which they may be sent. I have received as high as $250.00 for one one thousand word tabloid story—one that I wrote for a syndicate, in the hope of selling it for six dollars. The syndicates all returned it saying it was no good—and it wasn't any good for their purposes—I didn't think it was any good for any purpose. Never try to pass judgment on your own work—let editors do it—they don't know anything about good and bad short stories either; but they know what they want, in some

cases, and very often they want what you or I would consider inferior work and won't have anything at all to do with what you or I would consider a very fine story.

There are a number of writer's magazines from which lists may be obtained of the various markets for tabloid, and other types of stories. It is a good idea to buy these magazines; there are two principal ones. Inquire of your news dealer concerning this. The "market tip" departments are invaluable, especially to writers who do not live in New York. I shall, later on, get to the question involved in a possible descent by the well-heeled tyro upon Eastern editorial dens.

chapter - -

V

THE SHORT STORY

"An era is fast approaching when no writer will be read by the majority, save and except those who can effect for bales of manuscript what the hydrostatic screw performs for bales of cotton—by condensing into a period what before occupied a page."

COTTER

LONG BEFORE YOU OUGHT TO TRY IT, YOU will be wanting, if you have real determination to muscle in on the free lance fiction racket, to try your hand at stories longer than one thousand words; stories of from twenty-five hundred to five and seven thousand words, and possibly "novelettes," of from fifteen to twenty-five thousand words; perhaps even magazine serials, which usually run somewhere between twenty-five thousand and fifty thousand words.

You oughtn't to do it until you have written tabloid stories for about six months and sold dozens of them, but you probably will, just as I did.

Your first real discouragement and possible defeat will come now. You'll have a terrible time writing these longer lengths, and a Simonized terrible time selling them. They are far harder to write and they are much harder to sell than tabloid stories, because they are longer and because the market for them is more limited and exacting than for tabloid stories. You cannot look to the easy-to-make syndicates as markets for them, except in very rare instances. The relationships you have established with syndicate editors will mean nothing now; they will probably not give you notes to magazine editors . . . and if they would it wouldn't be wise to use the notes . . . the magazine editors consider most syndicate writing a sort of "barn storming." If you are wise you will not even tell magazine editors that you have been selling syndicates. They won't know it unless you tell them. Magazine editors don't read anything but their own magazines—with inward groaning and travail of soul—and occasionally racing forms, Walter Winchell's column, and privately published pornography.

But, after all, why *shouldn't* you have a hard time? If it was easy, any little mug could chisel in on the racket, and it wouldn't be any good for anybody. It doesn't take brains, certainly, to be a free lance fiction racketeer—the fact that I am one proves that—but it takes an ironclad psychic intestinal tract. And remember, if you had decided to become a doctor, a lawyer, or even a Christian Science practitioner, you would have

had not only several years of study before you could begin to earn, but you would have needed a license before you could practice medicine or law. You'd have had to join the local bar association, or the American Medical Association.

Just as the American Medical Association and bar associations keep chiselers out of those rackets, so does this great difficulty you're having keep chiselers without guts out of your racket. It is a far better guarantee than doctors and lawyers have; for doctors or lawyers may obtain all of their credentials without knowing anything, really, about making sick people well, or getting mentally ailing people out of jail. There will be nothing theoretical or political about your license to practice when you earn it.

Let us branch away a bit now from the love story. There are, thank goodness, many other kinds of stories, though no other kind is as easy to sell as love stories. There are, for instance, frank love stories called sex stories. I have written a great many of these. But the magazine market for them is limited. Sex magazines are usually not very well financed and therefore not customarily able to pay for protection from political interference. Book publishers, without let or hindrance, publish many times franker sex material than any sex magazine would ever dare approach; so readers of this type of love story have turned to the totally uninhibited book market, though there is still mild trading in the sex story market which will pick up when sex maga-

zine publishers learn how to dicker with the censors. Western story writers and detective story writers who write nothing else have large, steady incomes.

There are also good markets for business stories, religious stories, pseudo-scientific stories and supernatural stories. Many writers specialize in some very narrow market and make excellent money in good times, and a living during Republican administrations.

There are, in the periodical market for free lance fiction, circles within circles. There is the so-called "Quality Group" of magazines, including the *American Mercury*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Forum*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, etc. There are the Women's Magazines, such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal*; there are the "Populars," as they are called in the racket; magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Liberty* and *Colliers*, printed on "slick paper," and published because of the advertisements they contain.

There is the "Pulp Paper" group of magazines, the largest group of all, taking every imaginable type of story.

Of these various groupings the "Quality Group" magazines publish the best stories and pay the next to poorest prices; the pulp paper magazines pay the poorest prices and publish the poorest stories; but often pulp paper writers make more than authors in the other magazine groupings because these magazines use an enormous quantity of material; many times more than all the

other types of magazines put together, and this type of material can be written speedily by practised hands.

Almost any of the types of stories so far mentioned can be sold to all of these magazine groups; though the quality of the story varies a great deal as between one magazine group and another.

Pulp paper magazines are not as exacting in their requirements as other types of periodicals—they can't be; they don't pay enough. For this reason, the pulp paper group of magazines is an excellent one for the tyro writer to train in and, like an amateur college football player, make some pretty good money at the same time.

The cultured reader would detect only one essential difference between the fiction in slick paper magazines, among which are included the women's magazines, and the fiction in pulp paper magazines.

He would find the former consciously and intentionally bad writing, and the latter unconsciously and naïvely bad writing.

You will, of course, want to jump from the writing of tabloid stories for syndicates to the writing of full length stories for slick paper magazines.

This you will find very hard to do; because the difference between highly salable consciously bad writing, and cheap, unconsciously bad writing, is practice and facility.

If you are going to insist upon trying for slick paper before gunning at pulp paper for awhile there is no

way that I can stop you—and the plain truth of the matter is that you might, possibly, succeed; some have. But it is my opinion, humbly offered, that you will in every way do far better to pass from tabloid stories sold to newspaper syndicates, to full length stories planned for pulp paper magazines. Whichever you do you will be writing full length short stories, which brings us to the point where I ought, pundit like, to produce a pat statement as to just what a short story is. I cannot do that because my opinion as to what constitutes a perfect short story is immaterial.

Roughly speaking, however, you can make up your own mind as to what a perfect short story is; upon this point there is not the slightest sign of agreement anywhere, not even among short story writers, editors, or literary critics.

There is an excellent short story in the Bible, a sex story, by the way, in the Third Book of the Kings, Chapter 1. Here it is, by special permission of the Copyright Owner:

"Now King David was old and stricken in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he gat no heat. Wherefore his servants said unto him, Let there be sought for my lord the king a young virgin; and let her stand before the king a young virgin; and let her cherish him, and let her lie in thy bosom, that my lord the king may get heat."

That formula has been run to death for years in the sex story magazines; I have myself written many ver-

sions of it and sold them widely. The Bible is full of first rate sex story formulas, and though they have been worked to death—all except the one about Lot and his daughters—most of them are still good. When the sex novelists have exhausted everything else they will get around to the Lot and his daughters formula. A canny novelist would do well to start on such a theme right now. I promise not to tackle the theme myself; the only book that has ever shocked me is the Bible.

I have read, just as you probably have, hundreds of croakings as to just what a short story is; and the only words that ever thoroughly satisfied me on this score were by Robert Nichols, in his volume, "Fantastica." (Macmillan.)

"A story is always a concentration to a given point—in this it resembles a waterspout: two vortices of opposite forces drawn toward each other until—hey presto! for a moment the thing stands whirring, fused, and, topmost pleasure, seemingly alive throughout."

If you write something like that and send it to a commercial editor, even though it be a masterpiece, his reaction will be one of dismay and fright, followed by anger and suspicion.

From the commercial editor's point of view, the trouble with the Biblical short story which I wrote into the record is that it doesn't get anywhere. For *Snappy Stories Magazine*, the King would have to Gat some Heat, even if it were necessary, in addition to the virgin, to put a can of Sterno under his royal bed.

In the *Saturday Evening Post* the King would not be allowed to Gat any Heat, unless he used only a Sterno can. If the Sterno Company happens to advertise in the *Post,* the story's chances of acceptance—with can attached—would be heightened; though of course you would not be permitted to use the trade name "Sterno" in the story.

In all slick paper magazines the King would be expected to marry the girl if she Gat him some Heat; current periodicals are not, by the United States mail censors, ever permitted to get as bawdy as the Bible.

For the Quality Group, the King would need to have some internal ratiocinative combustion in the Proust manner, by way of heat; after which he would not need to marry the girl, but would be called upon only to reflect in his attitude toward her the general amorphous quality of life.

What I am trying to get at is that a story can mean practically anything to anybody; and does always mean different things to different groups of editors, though it may be the same story.

Some say that a short story must reflect a striving to overcome an obstacle on the part of a character or characters. In my humble opinion this is nonsense. Obstacles have nothing to do with the matter, *as obstacles.* The strivings and the overcomings are simply exercises which the reader plays over as he reads, in order to hear overtones from his latent sadism.

The only time I ever saw a real writer read a book

for writers he howled with laughter. He also was puzzled over all the complicated things dwelt upon. One of his own stories was in the book, with numbers beside each line of the story, and each number attached to some bizarre footnote which told what the author was trying to do at the point numbered. The author, as a matter of fact, wasn't trying to do anything of the kind at the point mentioned. He didn't know what on earth the author of the book for writers was talking about.

What the average magazine editor means by a short story is one of the formulas I have given you, tricked out with variations having some element of freshness to them.

In your tabloid story you introduced characters. Then you brought these characters together; then you inserted a complication, provided suspense, and closed the story in a way to surprise the reader; or, if not in a way to surprise him, at least in a way to satisfy him.

Going from the thousand word length to the greater length, you do practically the same thing, with a difference that such things as atmosphere, style, manner of presentation, matter a great deal more; that is why you need more practice than you are probably going to force yourself to have, before going to the longer story.

But actually so far as the structure, or architecture of the story is concerned, it is much the same. For heaven's sake do not think of obstacles and conflict and drama, and all that bookish rot.

A good average length short story is still about five

thousand words. Many run to seven or eight thousand words, and some run between twenty-five hundred and thirty-five hundred words; but the five thousand word short story sets the style of architecture and structure for most of the other lengths above one thousand words, and short of the novelette lengths. (The novelette lengths will be automatically covered when we have come to the writing of your first novel, since they differ from novels only in length.)

My method of writing the five thousand word story is the same as my method for writing the thousand word tabloid story; I put characters into an impossible situation and then extricate them. I think it is a good method, at least for me, because it engenders a spontaneity that is not present in a story if I plot it all out carefully in advance. Sometimes, however, I go woefully astray using such a loose and shameless method, and I had better advise you to be more careful.

To begin with, in writing a five thousand word story, *you must have an opening incident containing movement and dialogue.* I mean that you *must* have if you want to write the most easily salable type of story. This incident, in a five thousand word story, need not last longer than about five hundred words. In it should appear the leading character, if there is but one leading character in the story; if there are several important characters, it is best to get two and if possible three of them into it. If it is a love story, the male and female leads should most positively appear.

This opening incident, or "narrative hook," as some authors call it, need not be any more thoroughly integrated with the rest of the story than the barker's spiel before a snake charmer's act.

See, in this connection, the only text books any free lance commercial fictioneer needs: current periodicals.

Glance over the first five, six or eight hundred words of the full length short stories in the magazines you have at hand. Usually you will find this narrative hook.

It will not be present in all published stories, even in popular magazines. A few "Big Name" writers are permitted to omit it. When a writer's name has become well known to popular readers he may do as he likes.

However, the narrative hook is an excellent sales trick and you will find it embodied in more than half of the stories in either slick paper or pulp paper magazines.

This opening incident attended to, you can next bring up facts collateral to the story; even though you do this in the way of tedious expository matter. Such material should be kept down to a minimum, however, even when it is supported by a brilliant narrative hook. To the extent possible all expository matter should be cut down, with narrative writing and dramatic writing substituted. In connection with this do please refer again to the text books I previously recommended—the magazines—in order to get this clearly understood without my wasting pages explaining it when it is perfectly obvious in the average published story and there in-

stantly and clearly to be apprehended. If you haven't got brains enough to see it there you'll never learn it from books on narrative technique.

During this second five hundred words you ought to strive for convincing atmosphere and background, especially if the story is to be submitted to slick paper magazines. If it is for pulp paper magazines, don't concern yourself so much about the atmosphere and background.

Characterization is another matter. We will get to it in due time. Until that time don't worry about it. Let it take care of itself, as you will have to anyway, since you can't manufacture it out of thin air as you can the rest of these story components. The important thing is to get these first stories done at all; just as it is important for one learning to drive a motor car to have complete control of it for a time early in his instruction.

This first thousand or so of words accomplished, you have the story well started. The culmination, with the end of the complication, should not take, at most, over five hundred words; the less words the better. O. Henry could do it in ten words.

In between the narrative hook and the trick, or satisfying, ending, is the body of the story, containing the complication, suspense, background and lots of movement and dialogue. A story that is seventy-five percent dialogue is at least ten times as easy to sell as one that is fifty percent dialogue; and one that is fifty percent dialogue is about five times as easy to sell as one that is

twenty-five percent dialogue. One that is less than twenty-five percent dialogue is mountainously handicapped in the commercial fiction market; one that is much less than twenty-five percent dialogue might just as well be torn up.

Characterization, that is, expository matter not in quotes whose purpose is to establish the characters as real should be held down to as low as ten percent of the entire story wordage. Most characterization should come incidentally, through action and dialogue.

In some of the better stories in the slick paper magazines, especially the women's magazines, you will find a great deal of wordage devoted to introspection by characters in the story. This is dangerous for the beginning writer. If you will look carefully at the magazines, you will see that this privilege is indulged in more by the well established Big Name writers, than by the vaguely unfamiliar names you see in the list of contents.

Most really fine short stories, such as those of Katherine Mansfield and Stephen Crane, are filled with introspection on the part of the characters; but if you are going to write to sell, don't even read Katherine Mansfield and Stephen Crane. They will poison your subconsciousness, so far as facile, salable writing is concerned.

If you have the patience to do it, you will profit greatly by selecting several magazines of various types, counting several stories in each, and dividing and distributing the count in percentages of action, introspection, characterization and dialogue in each story. When

you see these percentages, and compare them with the stories you are writing, you will discover to yourself, in unforgettable fashion, one of the biggest secrets of the free lance fictioneer's racket. In these percentages will appear immediately the huge difference between easily salable commercial stories, and the stories of apprentices.

If it is a full length love story you are now attempting, its architecture need be not greatly different from that of your tabloid story. There is the propinquity of nubile creatures of the opposite sex. There is the attraction between them. There is the complication; and there is the ending. The complication is merely spread out over more space, the suspense is fiddled with at greater length—that is all. All the hocus pocus about "First Plot Incident, Second Plot Incident," drama, conflict, obstacles, strivings, is nothing but bookish mummery. Any writer who actually sells his work will tell you that—it is not at all a controversial matter.

Any practised writer can, of your thousand word tabloid, make a seven thousand word story, or a hundred thousand word novel, by simply increasing the duration of the complication, the suspense, and the light or heavy sadism implicit. If you do not wish to take my word for this, unhole somewhere the collected novels and stories of Guy de Maupassant, published in a translation by Earnest Boyd through Alfred A. Knopf and Company. Look at volume five of this set containing a story entitled "The Legacy." This is the same as a story

entitled "A Million," contained in volume six of the same set. De Maupassant, who was a far greater master of the commercial short story than O. Henry, wrote "The Legacy," as a tabloid story, and then later, for some reason, rewrote it as a novelette, under the title "A Million."

I have in my archives many instances of this manipulation by authors of all sorts whereby a given story was as easily squeezed within tabloid form as stretched out to fill a four hundred page novel.

Don't be intimidated by the demonology of the technical Magi. Have done, I beseech you, at least while you tarry with me, with all the black sorceries of those who carry unconcealed pedagogical divining rods. Tear up, or for the time being put away and out of mind the two bit horoscopes of the didactic astromancers of commercial fiction writing. Let's laugh at all that and sans tape of any hue proceed toward somewhere with all speed, exorcising as we go all academic necromancy intended for the befuddlement of sophomores.

Commercial stories are always built on simple formulas, tricked out with relatively fresh incidents, bits of business and interpolations.

On this point, before writing this book I talked to many other authors; and though in other matters they violently disagreed with me, they all concurred in laughing at the gaudy categories of technique exploited in most formal writing instruction.

Such tinselry has no more to do with the plain facts

of the free lance commercial fiction racket than books on political science have to do with actual politics.

If your story is not to be a love story, your problem is little different from that involved in the love story formulas.

You will, in beginning the story, use an incident full of movement and dialogue. Having in this manner secured your reader's attention, you will drop back to bring in background, atmosphere and cold facts collateral to the story.

Following this you will drive toward the end of the story, trying there to surprise the reader, if possible, or at least to satisfy him. As you drive in this direction, pick up all the hitch-hikers you can carry in the way of complication and suspense.

I'm dreadfully sorry it sounds so easy. It is disillusioning, I know. . . . For me to talk about authorship like this makes writers look silly.

But the thing is inevitable. When I was a petty officer in a bank I sometimes glanced through books on banking; they had no relation whatsoever to any banking going on all around me. The Big Shot officers of the bank used to buy such books and stick them up on their desks; but they never read them. If you could hear bank officials talking about banking among themselves, banking would seem sillier to you than I have made authorship seem.

I have read books on aviation; from them I got no help whatever. And then one day I discovered why. A

newspaper man invited me to spend a day and night with him on the U. S. S. plane carrier *Saratoga*. During the evening about seventy aviators talked aviation. They made it seem much as I make writing seem to you. And *they* could *fly*. After reading several books on aviation I had in hopeless puzzlement given up all thought of buying a plane and hiring an instructor to teach me to run it.

Had I come across a book on aviation written *as those aviators on that boat talked that night* I would have bought the plane. That is the sort of book I am trying to write for you.

I much admire the growing generation of writers, because I notice that they have a healthy contempt for pedagogues and theologians; as Doctor Ralph H. Major, M.D. ("The Doctor Explains") puts it:

"Each succeeding generation shows less taste for theological controversy and increasing respect for the discoverers of facts."

chapter--

VI

STYLE

"I am not inclined to lay much stress on style or mere verbal excellence; a conception may be as great in sandstone as in marble, in putty as in bronze. Of course, I prefer the marble and bronze to sand and putty but the conception is, after all, the chief thing."

FRANK HARRIS

"STYLE IS THE MAN!" . . . THAT IS THE way all chapters on style begin. How exquisitely collegiate! As indelibly so as a college yell.

"Style is the man." Why not: "Haircut is the man. B. O. is the man. Urinalysis is the man." It sounds impressive to those with Chautauqua minds, and it doesn't mean anything.

After you have been writing for awhile you will write in a manner more or less peculiar to yourself; that will be your "style." . . . And that's all there is to style; the less attention you give to building it and the

less you notice the matter the better it will be for you; if you become hypersensitive about it, through reading overmuch on the subject you'll get so tangled up in it you won't be able to write at all. In short, you'll set up a woeful conditioned reflex against writing because of such hypersensitiveness.

You have noticed the peculiar staccato way in which I stagger along through this book, spattering extraneous material everywhere; running through rhetorical red lights; parking on the wrong side of syntax, violating all known traffic rules of scholarly composition. That is my style. While I don't particularly like it, any more than you do, I wouldn't trade it even for the style of Mr. James Branch Cabell, though I admire his style more than that of any other contemporary novelist. Yes, it is *mine*, and you will be surprised to know that among those few who read what I write my style is so indubitably associated with me that they can detect my writing even if I do not sign it. Under no circumstances plan your style upon mine; if you deliberately plan a style—which is a bad thing to do—take the style of almost any other contemporary writer; it is sure to be better than mine.

Everything that I write is written in this staccato, spilling over way; my letters, novels, brief notations aimed at reminding myself to do things I haven't the slightest intention of doing.

My style is at once my greatest pride and my greatest handicap. It has all of the deficiencies and none of the

proficiencies of Mr. Theodore Dreiser's manner; poor Theodore who writes monumental novels in the worst style ever seen. There are passages in Mr. Dreiser's books which I am willing to wager even he cannot unscramble, as to precise meaning, a year after he has written them. But that doesn't make a bit of difference, so far as Mr. Dreiser's work is concerned. If not the greatest living American novelist, he is certainly the second or third greatest, with Mr. Cabell and Mr. Sinclair Lewis somewhere fore or aft. The reason why Mr. Dreiser is such a great novelist despite his almost total inability to write at all, is that he has gigantic earnestness and determination. Someone painted him beautifully as a huge beast, staggering through the forest of contemporary life, trampling down trees, disarranging underbrush, and leaving a wide path instantly discernible to all lesser beasts. . . . An excellent description of Mr. Dreiser; he is like that. I have said a good many things to discourage you, because I want to be honest with you; now let me say one thing to encourage you very much. As you will plainly see if you read any of Mr. Dreiser's books, he can hardly write at all. Yet he is not only a very great novelist, but he has made almost as much money as a clever senator or congressman, or war time Dollar a Year Man. It is said—and sceptical as I am of what I read in newspapers I believe it—that he got a hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the motion picture rights on one book, "An American Tragedy"; certainly his worst novel. The writing in it is so very bad

that any professor of English or literature, in any American college, would instantly have marked it, as a theme, "D—."

Mr. Dreiser has cashed thousands upon thousands of dollars in royalty checks. I know it is bad taste to put it this way, but to hell with good and bad taste: Mr. Dreiser has made thousands where Mr. Cabell, who has a perfect style, has made hundreds. I personally consider Mr. Cabell a far greater novelist, and many others do too; but Mr. Dreiser occupies a unique position. He is not only considered a very great novelist, a greater one than Cabell by most, but he makes almost as much money as any of the frankly worthless novelists, like Peter B. Kyne, Harold Bell Wright, Kathleen Norris, et al. And all this with no more ability than you may have, to write, even if you are a clerk in an A. and P. store, and left school at the age of fourteen, with a work certificate, to get a job and support your drunken father. If you did that, you have as much education as I have. I ran away from home when I was fourteen and never went back to either home or school, except once, for a short period, to teach a graduate class in short story writing at a university. I gave it up almost at once because I felt that in accepting the university's pay check I was obtaining money under false pretenses.

To get from the general to the specific:

In the free lance fiction racket, there is no greater controversial question than that surrounding the matter of style. I will, in this connection, give you merely my

opinion, and warn you, as I give it, that by volume, I would be decidedly outvoted in my views by most editors and other successful free lance fictioneers.

Though no Big Shot I have made some money in the racket; sufficient to keep me in unliterary luxury; and spent it, Allah be propitiated, upon all manner of delightful foolishness; instead of investing it as investment bankers a few years ago were kindly advising me, in the bunch of swindling propositions which were then called "Gilt Edged Investments" by all conservative bankers!

Other writers who are less well known than I am have made many times what I have made, by writing as editors wished them to, in all things. There is a writer of western stories, whose name, if I were to give it here, you would not know at all, since he seldom uses it, but chooses to employ a variety of pseudonyms. He has no recognition except among the editors of western magazines. Yet he has made, and at pretty small word rates, a fortune writing nothing but western stories. He can write a five thousand word western story before lunch; a fifteen thousand word western novelette after lunch; and spend the evening writing the opening chapters of a serial. Sometimes he has from one to half a dozen of his stories in one number of a western magazine, under various names. He sells every word that he writes, and he can write faster than most stenographers.

There are writers like that in the confession magazine field, in the detective magazines, in every branch of

the free lance fiction racket. I do not say that their way of working is not a good way; it is probably an excellent way for them; but I would not do it if I could, for this reason:

If I "slant" my work, to suit each individual editor, and write it in the manner that he wants it written in, I do the same thing that a doctor or a lawyer would be doing if the doctor treated each patient, not as he thought he ought to be treated, but as the patient wanted to be treated; if the lawyer handled each case, not in his own manner of legal presentation, but in a manner favored by the client. Many doctors and lawyers do just that; but no Charles Mayo ever did it; no Clarence Darrow ever did it. Which is to say that in the long run, if one stick to one's guns in this matter of individual style, even if it is a very bad individual style, one may cash in as did Mr. Dreiser, and beside cashing in for dough, get something which may be to you of still more worth—a real reputation; a reputation, not as a "trained seal" to whom editors throw fish; but as a distinctive and highly individualistic writer.

Joseph Hergesheimer fought out this battle to a finish. For fourteen years, it is said, he wrote stories that editors would not buy; but now he has so firmly established himself that even though he is certainly an inferior writer, as compared to Mr. Cabell, Mr. Lewis and Mr. Dreiser, he stands four square as Mr. Joseph Hergesheimer, and not as a protean composite, able to turn himself into a seal or a butterfly at the suggestion of

some underpaid editor who thinks he knows what his readers want.

Do not be discouraged by all this. Consider this fact, which certainly ought to be a buoyant one: despite the fact that I have refused to slant my work; refused to conform in my style; refused to do things as editors wanted them done, and insisted upon doing them as I wanted them done, I have sold a lot of things, and will sell a lot more. I have made during the years I have been in the free lance fiction racket about as much as a good doctor or lawyer makes.

You probably visualize the starting of your practice as a fictioneer in terms of extreme difficulty in making friends with editors. There is difficulty in this, and you will have trouble; but let me assure you that those difficulties and troubles are far from insuperable to one with viscera. I have during all my writing years battled with editors. I have, many times, in articles appearing in writer's magazines, said all of the uncomplimentary things about them that I have said here; yet despite all this I have sold a lot of things and will sell a lot more.

What is more important, when you do get firmly established, you will not be dependent upon the good will of editors; and editors are not only fickle in their affections, but they are an insecure lot.

I have in my archives, where I would have over-much difficulty in locating it, a copy of a writer's magazine of twenty years ago, which listed all of the markets avail-

able to free lance writers of that day, giving, in each case, the editor's name.

Some months ago I compared that list with a current market list. Over ninety per cent of all editors had either shifted their jobs or slipped out of sight altogether over the period of two decades. They are being hired and fired even faster nowadays. When you slant toward an editor, and that editor gets fired, where are you?

About this matter, however, you will have to make up your own mind, as to whether you are going to be a highly pampered trained seal, tossed many a fat fish, and perhaps without any cessation of the feeding, or whether you are going to play a lone and much harder, but in the end more solidly satisfactory game. I said that what was mainly needed in this racket as in all other rackets was guts.

The opposition, those who violently disagree with me in this matter of style slanting, will tell you that it "does no harm" to slant your work. Perhaps this is so; I do not flatly declare that it does do harm; but I think there is harm, and that it is a negative rather than a positive harm, and hence more insidious. If one slant, one may not harm his style, if any; but if he keeps on slanting, he will never have any style at all; never any individuality. He will be selling an article that many competitors can manufacture and sell just as cheaply; while if he fights the bloody battle and writes in his own individual way he will have a patented article to

sell that no competitor can manufacture and sell at any price.

Perhaps the whole thing comes down to a matter of temperament. If you like to fight things out and get your own way there are certain advantages for you in not slanting; if you like to be diplomatic and take the course of least resistance, there *are* advantages in slanting. In connection with this slanting business it is curious to note that for years every editor in the United States insisted that slanting was the only way to write and publish magazines.

As a result, magazines became so universally dull—seemingly written from cover to cover by one writer every issue—that their circulations fell off enormously.

It was pointed out to editors over and over again in writers' magazines that slanting was ruining the whole magazine business for editors, for writers, for everybody. But to a man, every editor in America shook his head wisely and continued to slant.

Then Esquire Magazine burst like a bombshell in the midst of the moribund stupidity of American magazines. At fifty cents a copy its circulation mounted, and at the present writing still is mounting to unbelievable proportions.

Coronet Magazine followed, and achieved another spectacular success, because Esquire Magazine and Coronet Magazine were, and at the present writing are, completely unslanted.

But few American editors even yet see the hand-

writing on the wall; instead of following Arnold Gingrich's brilliant example, they still shake their heads, like the little china effigies you've seen with heads balanced upon counterpoising weights, and mumble, with each shake, "Slant, Slant, Slant."

Eventually dozens of these editors will lose their jobs, and, I dare say (but I can be wrong) the cycle will swing back, with Esquire Magazine and Coronet Magazine, to the days of the great American magazines which produced and built up the great writers of past days—the magazines whose pages were alive with dissimilarity and individuality and the lively juices of living authors . . . not moribund with one consumptive editorial viewpoint so consistently expressed with the redactor's pencil as to make the whole magazine seem to be written from cover to cover by the editor.

chapter--

VII

TEMPERAMENT

"Some are there that say I am no poet; but the bookseller that sells me thinks I am."

MARTIAL

I SHOULD LIKE HERE TO RECORD THAT IN my estimation auctorial temperament is a lot of baloney. The matter is of course highly controversial; but my own experience, and the pangs of other authors I have watched, leads me to believe that temperament is something for which the beginning author must prepare.

Of course, there is the theatrical, artificial exhibition of temperament put on often to please those who look for it—in case you intend to go in for that sort of thing; and I hope you do not. That sort of temperament is what your minister exhibits, pounding the pulpit when he whoops it up about Belial, or tells how the Gentle Master suffered little children to come unto him —after having been informed by the treasurer that the collection from the Sunday school was punk last Sunday.

The genuine auctorial temperament, it seems to me, is a matter of "Conditioned Reflexes."

"Conditioned Reflexes!" What a phrase. I blush for parading it before you. It sounds utterly preposterous, like a patent medicine, or a new New Humanism. Sometimes it almost appears that it would be better if Psychology were not a recognized science. If it were not, such things as "Conditioned Reflexes" could be discussed in simple terms and as something merely relating to common sense. But, unfortunately, Psychology has found its way into the hands of the professors, and can no longer be discussed without long words and high sounding overstuffed phrases.

"Conditioned Reflexes" were a part of human experience long before Psychology, as a formal science, was born. Don't think you can safely say to yourself: "Nerts! I simply won't be temperamental, it's all a pose." You *will* be temperamental; and increasingly so, as you establish your practice as a free lance writer. "Conditioned Reflexes" may mean more to you later on than your typewriter, your Thesaurus and your imagination, if any, as bears upon your writing. To give a simple illustration of the elements of the thing, suppose one put a canary, in its cage, atop a table. A round piece of cardboard about the size of a palm is held before the bird, close to the cage, but not close enough for the bird to be startled into banging its wings against the bars of the cage. Unless the cardboard is held too close to the cage the bird will not be unduly distressed by its

proximity. There will be no sharp, nervous wing flutter, such as canaries exhibit when surprised by sudden sharp sounds.

After it has been demonstrated that the round piece of cardboard ordinarily causes no nervous jerk of the wings it may be removed, temporarily.

When it is again presented before the bird, if at the same time, someone at a distance from the cage, perhaps in another room, makes a sharp noise, the bird will jerk nervously at the noise; feeling no concern whatever over the round piece of cardboard.

But if, after several presentations of the round cardboard, accompanied by the sharp noise, the cardboard is presented as it was upon the first occasion, *without* the sharp noise accompanying the presentation, the bird will give the same nervous jerk that it would give if the noise had accompanied the presentation.

That is a very simple "Conditioned Reflex."

Man is, of course, an animal. His mind, however, even at its worst, is far more highly sensitized than that of other beasts and conditioned reflexes of a far more intricate sort are set up in man's mind daily and hourly. My articles in writer's magazines often bring me notes from readers of those magazines. Some of these notes inform me that my very existence is displeasing to God and that I ought forthwith to hang myself.

However, I also get notes from those who are not Christians and hence not vitriolic. I got one such note some months ago from a writer who reported a phe-

nomenon of which I have heard endlessly since I began to write and meet writers. He had suddenly become unable to write anything at all under any circumstances whatever.

He had recently moved out of New York City and found a place where he could live cheaply in a small town in Delaware.

He liked his new surroundings immediately and was happy in them. Never having lived in the country before, he had no way of knowing what terrific boredom flows out of such existence after a time. Everything seemed propitious to him in his new location.

Something of an amateur psychologist himself, and having seen matter in one of my articles touching the psychological aspects of writing, he had written me in care of the magazine wherein the article appeared. We began a correspondence which developed most interestingly for both.

Early in our correspondence we decided that the whole of New York City could not possibly be his "Conditioned Reflex" toward writing. Our letters were voluminous and went into great detail as for weeks we hunted for a conditioned reflex through a process of elimination.

We eliminated social intercourse—he did not care much for it anyway, and often friends of his drove down from New York to see him. He could write no better after they had been there, or even while they were there visiting over night.

We eliminated the traffic noises of New York City, which had been an annoyance to him anyway. We eliminated practically everything and were about to give up when I asked him to write me a letter detailing his every move before writing a story. And it was his reply to this letter that located the "Conditioned Reflex" which, in him, was doing the damage.

He is a man who has always experienced and will probably always have difficulty in producing variations for formulas. He has a competent style for the sort of work he does; he is exceptionally clever at achieving good counterfeit plausibility. But "bits of business" for variations had always been very hard for him to manage.

Here is what happened before he wrote a story, when he lived in New York City: Living far north on Manhattan, he went downtown on the subway, interviewed a number of editors who regularly took his work, discussed their present needs, and found out where he would be likely to land a given type of story, once it was written.

Not much of a hand at controlling his finances, even in good times, and rather lazy, he never wrote anything at all until he needed money, whereupon he always made these wild trips downtown, got what amounted to an order for a story, then returned home on the subway to write it, sometimes with an advance in his pocket.

Every story he could ever remember planning he

planned on the subway, either going or coming from the publishing district in New York City.

On the subway, he would grow abstracted. He would look out of the windows, whether he was sitting down or standing up, and watch the blank, black subway walls with the interval lights and the stations every few blocks.

Under these conditions, his mind would go furiously and efficiently to work upon story planning. By the time he reached home, he would have his story all planned and ready to write. Often, he remembered, he had planned stories on the subway even when he was traveling upon it to some destination other than the publishing district. He almost always began to think of story plans the moment he got into a subway train.

His abstracted state of mind at such times; his staring into blankness with an occasional bright light and station platform had almost an hypnotic effect upon him.

When we had discovered the conditioned reflex that was rendering him totally inoperative I advised that he overcome it by patiently setting up a conditioned reflex of some other sort to counteract it. But he did not take my advice. Instead, he went to New York two or three times a month for the usual consultations. All he had to do was hit the subway and he immediately began to conceive story plans again. If he had persisted, he could have overcome the conditioned reflex in time, with patience and determination. Many such conditioned reflexes have to be overcome sternly; the important thing is to

watch for them, understand them, and know what is going on.

I have heard that Mr. Zane Grey was originally a dentist, a chiropractor, a veterinary surgeon, or something of that sort, living in a small Pennsylvania town. An article I read somewhere stated that when he wrote his first masterpiece it was in an old Morris chair, with a board across the arms, upon which rested his typewriter. No doubt he now has a gold typewriter, set with seven hundred jewels, and a board of solid platinum; but he was quoted, in the article, as saying that he *still used the same Morris chair*. . . . Which he took along with him when he left Pennsylvania and went to some gaudier place, American-like, upon the coming of success.

I have forgotten whether, in the article, he was quoted as saying that he still typed in the Morris chair, or whether he just sat in it while he dictated to relays of high salaried stenographers. But whichever he does, I will bet him one of his smaller yachts, against my wobbly and creaking typewriter, that if he lost that Morris chair he would have the devil of a time until he found another like it, or set up some new conditioning toward writing.

Your writing is touched at all points, you may be sure, by these conditioned reflexes.

Sometimes a conditioned reflex toward writing depends upon the presence of a loved one who has died—something of that nature. When something of this sort

has happened; and I have seen it happen to a number of writers, it is necessary to do precisely what a patient who has been long in bed in a hospital must do when cured; he must "learn to walk again," as they say in hospitals. Of course he learns to walk again much easier than would a person who had never walked at all.

A writer who has lost a conditioned reflex of unusual magnitude can learn to write again without it by establishing some new conditioned reflex, and he will learn to write again much faster than one who had never written at all.

These conditioned reflexes which, to such a great extent, control writing can, of course, be either subjective or objective. More often, I suspect, they are subjective and hence more elusive; but all "complexes" as the psychoanalysts call such things, are elusive; most of them, however, yield to searching self analysis.

If you think I have overstressed these conditioned reflexes that predicate the auctorial temperament, try this simple experiment (if you have been writing steadily for at least a month).

Think back carefully to some one thing that you always have done, right before sitting down to write, and try to sit down and write without doing that thing.

In the motion picture studios of Hollywood I have watched with intense amusement, over and over again, the following procedure.

The studios are full of former short story writers,

novelists, playwrights and radio writers who worked for years at home.

When they go into the studios, they are provided with stenographers in relays.

It is the habit of nearly all motion picture writers to pay their stenographers extra money if they are any good.

So the stenographers go to amazing lengths to prove that they are damned good in many directions.

If a pencil point breaks, they leap to replace it.

If the author turn to his typewriter they pout and feel that the author thinks they are no good at dictation.

All this "help" of course drives the seasoned free lance writer almost insane.

He gets up. Goes out to the studio commissary, or goes home; or hides in the basement . . . or sneaks around back of a "Wild Wall," on a sound stage, with a stub of a pencil, and the backs of a bunch of envelopes, and there outlines the essentials of his day's sequences.

This done, blandly he returns to his office, where he is overwhelmed with help and does all right for the day.

chapter--

VIII

MASQUERADE—THE SEX ELEMENT

"What is the matter with Mary Jane?
She's perfectly well, and she hasn't a pain;
But look at her, now she's beginning again!—
What is the matter with Mary Jane?"

A. A. MILNE

ALL RIGHT, LET'S LEAVE THE ESOTERIC, and get back to brass cracks, working toward Puritan symbolism.

Think back again to the tabloid story and the love story. The opening where the characters are brought within each other's magnetic fields. The final cohesion of the two poles of life's magnet, after the tantalizing hesitation. The temporary breaking up of the magnetic field; with, at last, complete adhesion, by trickery, or at least in a way eminently to satisfy the reader in the end.

That, I told you, was the whole bag of tricks; and I stick to my story without introducing any obstacle boxes with false bottoms . . . without trying to im-

press you by a flow of glib words before I pull rabbits out of a hat.

But, you say, you didn't carry that idea much beyond the fundamental love story, which you sickeningly said made up ninety percent of all fiction in all forms written since time began.

Now that you've been exposed to some mild occultism in the chapter just previous, let's go on with the other types of stories that are not love stories.

Here I plunge again into vastly controversial matters and give you my way, my opinion. . . . And it will jolt you, I am sure; because it is radically different from anything of the sort you have ever read before in any writer's magazine, or ever heard before in any class of short story writing. Before we proceed to the jolting, let me remind you of my introduction to this book; and let me quote to you from a remarkably fine little volume entitled, "The Religion of a Literary Man," by Richard Le Gallienne (G. P. Putnam's).

"Every book is dependent for readers on a certain limited section of society; no writer can be more than the representative of a certain temperament."

. . . And Richard Le Gallienne is not one of those costive aesthetes who write for The Few. He cracks into the *Saturday Evening Post* now and then. Whatever his literary standing—and frankly it is in some doubt in most quarters—he is a "successful" author.

Think upon that elemental love story formula I at first outlined.

See if you do not now see in it something that you did not see before. Is it not concealing something, that formula . . . and all the stories written from it?

Is it really as simple and sappy as it seems; or is it a rather clever mental mask called, technically (I abominate such fussy words as much as you do) "rationalization"?

Bear with me for a few pages; I promise to land you safely in harbor though we shall take a swing around the cosmic circle for a moment that may be somewhat dizzying to life insurance salesmen determined to write. (And many a successful writer was once a life insurance salesman.)

When the world began, life was simple. There were various pleasures, such as eating, drinking, killing, and sexing.

Then grew up the priestcraft racket. There was a real need for it at the time. People were killing each other off in such alarming fashion they needed to be frightened about something. The worst of it was they weren't even afraid of being killed themselves; even torture didn't stop them from killing others. The priestcraft invented gods and a life after death. At last the priests sold the idea and collected on it gorgeously; lived upon the fat of the land; had the choice of victuals, the lustiest concubines. And then, like many another reform campaign, they found that it was oversold and their easy livings were threatened.

They needed a new slogan. Along came Paul, an

impotent old fuss-budget. He could eat like a horse, but for some reason he either couldn't or wouldn't function sexually, or took no pleasure in it if he did.

So sex became a sin. . . . And the dark ages of humanity began. We are just now issuing from them with the wholesale license of novelists to treat sex frankly, so bitterly fought for years by the clergy and their pimps, the censors. As Chekhov says in his note book: "New literary forms always produce new forms of life and that is why they are so revolting to the conservative human mind." The clergy knew that if a sex literature were permitted to flourish, their most cashable "Sin" would soon be exercised without fear, as nature intended, by those who read the books. Now, unless they can think up a new sin to frighten their customers, the clergy is—heaven, (and the Cause of True Religion, whatever that is,) be praised—through.

Nobody anymore, not even the most pathetic religious zealots, believes that there is anything really sinful about sex . . . any more than there is anything sinful about overeating, though it, too, may lead to a bellyache if some caution be not observed.

But there is a vast lot of conditioning back of the priest evolved ballyhoo about sex being sinful. Behind every love story there is, of course, the thought of sex. It is *all* sex, in symbolical, rationalized form. It is impossible to conceive a male creature and a female creature, not deranged, falling in love with each other if both knew that the other had no equipment for the

practice of sex. The love story, in all its forms, is obviously a masked sex story, symbolically denatured for those milk and water conditioned souls who have been taught for so many generations it is in their very germ plasm, that there is something sinful in sex, and that they mustn't even think about it, let alone practice it extemporaneously, except for creative purposes, and then only after some minister has made a profit on the transaction. But it is impossible, literally impossible, for human beings not to act or think about sex. As H. G. Wells says, in "The World of William Clissold," (George H. Doran):

"If anything was needed to clinch our belief in the naturalist's explanations of man's origins, it would be this extravagance of our sexual side. No designing mind, no mind, at any rate, with a glimmering of human reason, would have produced a sort of life so dominated and swamped by sexual desire as we are, nor have permitted that desire to escape so easily from fruition to quite fruitless gratifications."

One thing above everything else nature demands of us all, and that is, sex expression. The fact that the world today is so neurotic is directly traceable to the frustration of the sex impulse, in the idiocies of conventional marriage, and otherwise.

But sex is never completely inhibited, either mentally or physically. Sat upon firmly, it bursts out in some curious and distorted way. That is why I said it was literally impossible for human beings not to act upon

or think about sex. But many human beings act upon it and think about it in an oblique way. This the psychologists call, with dreadful complexity, "sublimation." Though it is a controversial matter there are a great many who believe that most great art is a sublimation of the sex impulse, just as mighty endeavor in business, politics, and other departments of life is a perversion of the sexual impulse. I am not at all prepared to say that this is not a good thing; nor am I prepared to say that it is a bad thing . . . But I can see that it is a true thing, and on this point many see the same thing that I do, even if they do not see it, as I do not see it, in quite the direct Freudian connotation.

In dealing with your simple formula love story, you were dealing really with a masked erethism on the part of the reader, almost always an unconscious erethism . . . the same sort of naïve, innocent erethism maiden ladies have when they howl hymns about walking with sweet Jesus in a garden full of red roses and hot odors after dark.

In *Snappy Stories Magazine* you use precisely the same formula that you use for a love story in the *Saturday Evening Post*, with the difference, usually, that the objective of the characters, in *Snappy Stories Magazine*, is honest, outright sex expression, while in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the lovers come together in the garden at dusk. There is the heavy scent of flowers all around. The evening is slightly warm (but not warm enough for the heroine to perspire much—in fact she *never*

perspires in the *Post*, even though they do run Odorono advertisements and probably get complaints about this non-perspiring of characters from the Odorono Company's advertising manager). The heroine's breast heaves. The hero snorts and prances around considerably. They go to each other's arms, and something "electric" passes between them; in fact they usually exhibit all of the symptoms included in Mr. Havelock Ellis' remarks on tumescence. And then the author informs you that they will get married. . . . That is as far as Pappa Senfgurken, out in Gubyville, Mo., wants the nervous system of his third daughter to be titillated. And I don't blame Pappa Senfgurken much, considering the silly social conditions in which his daughter has got to manage to exist; where she would be horribly humiliated and mistreated if she yielded to her natural impulses without proper precautions. Until the general level of intelligence of society has been lifted above priestcraft, one has simply got to sympathize with Pappa Senfgurken, even if one would not be inclined to do so for practical reasons in the free lance fiction racket.

Well then, in the masked sex story formula the characters start, immediately the story opens, to move toward something . . . toward sex, wrapped in Cellophane. In the detective story, and in every other story, precisely the same sort of thing happens. The characters begin to move toward something, involving themselves

in complications along the way, but achieving desire, either directly or indirectly in the end.

Find a reader of detective story magazines and western story magazines in which no "love interest" appears, and you find the sort of person who, in grammar school, was "ashamed" to go with girls, or if a feminine reader, with boys . . . who was probably twitted about it, at home, or by school mates. A normal boy in grammar school, so soon as he "falls in love" with a girl, yearns to perform feats of physical valor for her. This, as Mr. Havelock Ellis would soon show you, is a secondary sex characteristic. Sex itself is a physical feat. Other physical feats, especially those performed before a grandstand packed with coeds, relate directly, inescapably and indubitably to the thought of sexual expression. Not, of course, that this notion is—except very rarely—had and held by either the football players seeking to break each other's necks, or the coeds who find themselves filled with strange and tantalizing thrills as they see hairy he men brutally banging and bashing each other.

The thing has been so over-larded with years and years of rationalizations that you do not believe me, I fear. But I know a way to convince you, though it is a long and involved way. If you have not already done so —and if you have done so and forgotten—consider the significance of the beautiful early Greek stories and legends of physical valor up and down the Peloponnesus. Discover, or remember, how direct and indubitable

was the relationship between the display of physical strength and valor and the love making which invariably followed. There, at the dawn of civilization, when nobody bothered much with rationalizations, was to be found every evidence of the predominance of sex in the emotional life impulses, and its direct relation to every other department of human activity.

. . . The gladiator, besieged by maidens after his bloody victory. The statesman, who, if he gained power, made it his first concern once he had achieved it to pick himself a swell collection of hot mammas. The poet, around whose head—and not always around his head—were hung the wreaths of worshipful hetaera. The successful merchant, who could buy rare young wives brought from near and far. And, opposed to all this beautiful frankness about sex and glorious unrationalized expression of it: a few contemporary Upton Sinclairs and Irving Babbitts, in the persons of dusty Aristotle and musty Socrates.

The whole literature of that time abounds with such proof of what I say that I waste no more time defending my position but bid you go look for yourself into the period, or refresh your memory if in the past you were familiar with it.

But all of that joyous natural honesty of human emotions has passed out of life. It is coming back; but it will be hundreds of years before it fully returns. And in the meantime the drive toward sexual expression, the

strongest emotional drive in man, will continue to take on all manner of disguises and symbolical interpretations.

The little boys who thought it shameful to go with little girls in grammar school have grown up and married, and they are still a trifle ashamed of "love" and sex even in the marriage relation. Out of the marriage relation their approaches to it are furtive and dirty, because they are convinced that they are sinning. They don't like much to think about it; and they don't like to act about it except covertly. Yet they feel this curious driving in them constantly. They watch a mastermind in a detective story creep up upon some poor devil of a thief. They watch a cowboy pick up steers by the antlers, or whatever those things are on steers' heads (if steers have things on their heads) and toss them around.

They read reams and reams of stuff where men shoot each other and chase each other and hurt each other, for no good reason at all. *That,* they feel, is manly. . . . None of your slush about love. None of your dirt about sex. (But let them get hold of a pack of pornographic French pictures which they can examine unobserved!)

In many men, the exercise of the sublimated drive is not so crude. There is a large market for detective stories wherein the problem comes pretty close to being a pleasant intellectual exercise. But always there is the drive . . . the characters in juxtaposition at the beginning. The complication. The culmination which either surprises or satisfies the reader. And *always* the sadism, faint or bold; obvious or cleverly concealed. In commercial

short stories, with but few exceptions (which we shall treat next), the original love story formula holds good, with variations and modifications; with various degrees of suspense and complication.

One of the astounding peculiarities of the American morals mart is that only sex is considered immoral. Murder, robbery, arson, torture, piracy, cruelty in any form are considered thoroughly moral by the Catholic church, the Protestant church, the movies, all the magazines, and all the book publishers.

All these media are constantly filled with all these things so much more immoral than sex, and neither the Catholic church, nor the Protestant church care a whoop—but when the matter of sex comes up, then all the moral dervishes begin to fill the air with their droolings about morality.

I scared the pants off half the big shot Catholic churchmen, and Protestant churchmen in the United States not so long ago by suggesting to them that they ought to do something about the immorality of murder instead of confining all their activities to sex.

With Burton Rascoe as official rhetor, I organized the Author's Purity League, and sent out the following letter:

"*Dear Reverend;*

"The large insurance companies know that inestimable homicides, thefts and other acts of violence are continuously perpetrated by those who read fiction setting

forth 'clever' means for committing felonies and misdemeanors.

"There has ever been some doubt as to whether sex, in literature and drama, has caused more sex than there would be anyway; but there is no doubt at all in the minds of the country's prosecuting attorneys, wardens, psychologists and juvenile delinquency authorities that fiction concerning murder, theft and violence is responsible for a yearly national carnage that makes the World War seem like a sideshow in comparison.

"In the past it has been said that sex well written may be justifiable; but the more ingeniously themes of Murder, Theft and Violence are handled, the more potentially dangerous they are.

"The long, costly sex censorship has, apparently, had no effect other than to put all censorship under a cloud, because of the various dubious fowl who promoted it; the same intensity as against themes of Murder, Theft and Violence might have been extremely fruitful of results, since there is sound reason for attacking crimes that are *malum in se*, rather than those *malum in prohibitum*.

"This censorship organization is a non-profit one. It does not collect, and will not accept money from anyone for any reason whatsoever; none of its officers get any money out of it in any way.

"It will use persuasion and not make itself obnoxious by seeking to employ policemen's clubs upon the heads of those who disagree with its aims; it specifically recog-

nizes the right of anyone to disagree with its aims utterly.

"One can scarcely hold to the ridiculous position that if sex is transmissible psychologically to readers, impulsions toward Murder, Theft and sadistic Violence are not; or to the equally absurd conclusion that if sex is immoral, Murder, Theft and Violence are not, or less so.

"We ask your support in waging an intellectual, rather than a 'must' campaign to subdue or to terminate the post-hypnotic suggestion applied to the American reading public by literature dealing with Murder, Theft and Violence.

"We recognize your right to refuse to give this help.

"And we would like to point out that there is no more sex in this country than in any other country; but there is more Murder, Theft and Violence than in many other civilized countries."

* * * * *

Offhand you'd say that was the sort of society to which a Catholic or Protestant churchman might give at least moral support—but I was overwhelmed with return letters from Catholic and Protestant clergy all over the United States trying to prove to me that sex was more immoral than murder. I should like to include some of the letters here—but they make out the most conclusive case for moronic imbecility, ignorance, fanaticism and self-seeking ever adduced against the

American clergy, Catholic and Protestant, and I turned the lot of them over to another writer who is bringing out a whole book of them with comment.

I finally had to put an end to the society because some of my best friends begged me to cut it out before I had the censorship racketeers in New York and Chicago actually cracking down on detective stories.

chapter--

IX

"TREATMENT" STORIES

"A man who writes well writes not as others write, but as he himself writes; it is often in speaking badly that he speaks well."

MONTESQUIEU

FIRST AND FOREMOST AMONG WHAT many authors call "treatment stories,"* is the confession story. The confession story purports to be written by one who relates a true experience out of his or her life. It is written in the first person, in all cases. There are a number of confession story magazines now on the market, the most successful of which is the Macfadden Publishing Company's *True Story Magazine*. The outstanding success of this magazine, from its inception, is one of the most amazing and discouraging developments in American writing. In it outraged kitchen mechanics tell of their ravishment by the son of the house who then, the dog, married a girl of his own social station,

* Not to be confused with motion picture "Treatment Stories."

permitting the k. m. to go out into the world with her unnamed brat; whereupon she becomes a prostitute, in order to keep the child from starving, finally joining the Salvation Army and marrying a good man with a heart of chromium plate. I have myself written a number of stories for *True Story Magazine*, and for other confession story magazines, and was well paid for them; in the case of *True Story Magazine* I won some prize or other once which brought the story word rate up very high. I do not dare tell you here that these stories I sold to *True Story Magazine* were simply synthetic, concocted junk, because I signed an affidavit to the effect that they were true stories out of my own personal experience. (In them I had no bastard children, except, of course, the idea behind the story.)

I have also written confession stories for *True Confession Stories Magazine*, *I Confess Magazine*, and several other confession story magazines. Of the editor, or past editor of *I Confess Magazine* I know a peach of a story, and whether or not it is true, it is still a good story, and well illustrates a confession magazine point.

A writer friend of mine who was in New York temporarily, feeding liquor to editors in the hope of getting more acceptances when he went back home (a sound policy), dropped in to see the lady editor of *I Confess Magazine*. My writer friend is an ingratiating person and so is the lady who then was editor of *I Confess Magazine*. They got along together splendidly from the start, and were chatting enjoyably when an office girl

entered to announce that a certain writer (male) who specializes in confession stories had arrived for a consultation with the editor. The editor of *I Confess Magazine*, according to my writer friend, exclaimed in annoyance and petulance at thus being disturbed:

"Christ! There's that darned unwed mother come to see me again. I'm sorry; we'll have to cut our chat short."

Not, to be fair to *True Story Magazine*, and all the other confession magazines, that this sort of thing accounts for *all* their stories. The formula I gave you at the beginning of this chapter, for confession stories, was, however, run to death in the confession magazines for years, and still occasionally appears (I'll bet I could write it again with variations today and sell it to some confession magazine next week).

True Story Magazine (and for all I know the other confession magazines too) has occasionally run a real confession story. And several times I have, in reading *True Story Magazine*, found amazingly fine pieces of fiction; fiction that would rank high even as judged by purely literary standards, whatever they may be. The important thing with these magazines is not formula, or story; nor yet even complication or suspense; though there must be plenty of sadism and masochism.

You develop one character, as clearly as it is possible for you to paint a character (and it doesn't need to be too clear just so there is some faint plausibility about the characterization) and then you make that character

suffer like all get out, and suffer because of an adherence to some rococo principle. You send the poor innocent character to jail; you have him beaten up, chewed up, mangled (but not beyond recovery at the end of the story); insulted, humiliated, put upon mountainously, all because of his or her principles. If, by chance, the leading character sin, he or she does so not for the fun of it, but for some reason deeply involved in celestial quiddity or to feed some other character, or to buy a warm coat for his old mother. And while you are doing all this, you must make the reader sympathize *deeply* with the character. When truth and justice and right triumph in the end, the reader must either have an actual orgasm or go into hysterics of satisfaction.

If you can do this—and few can—you have a steady fat income waiting for you in the confession market. It is a gift, and unless you are unusually stupid, you won't have that gift. But if you are the sort who gets goose pimples all over when Old Glory passes by in a parade; if you are the sort who weeps, at little orphan boys in motion pictures; if you thrill when homosexual radio announcers talk about the Great Mother Heart over the radio, before trying to sell you some new patented pap, you can probably write confession stories. And if you try your hand at it, please remember (and this is no controversial matter—though I am no expert at it I have written and sold many confession stories, and I know many others who have) there is—I'm sorry —*nothing* more complicated about it than what I have

told you; you can get books on the technique of the confession story which will make the writing of a confession story comparable to a series of cross word puzzles combined with a jig saw map of the United States . . . but unless you have the academic mind and are never satisfied until you have made things as hard as possible for yourself, you will only injure your chances for writing the confession story by reading such books.

Simply fix in your mind a character who entertains stupendous fundamental good purpose. Without any formula; without any beginning or ending or sides; without any specific complication, trick ending, or planned suspense, let that character suffer and suffer and suffer; and then in the end let her somehow get a name for her child—perhaps even be elected president of the Garden Club in Kokomo Hills, Kokomo, Indiana; let it be discovered that she has an ancestor which entitles her to membership in the D. A. R. Let her play a better hand at bridge than the wife of the local proprietor of a Ford Agency, who is the social leader of the town. That is all, I assure you. That is absolutely all. That and practice, or a definite knack for the thing at the beginning; plus, as always, a careful and exhaustive study of the only text book worth while, the magazine to which you intend to attempt contributing.

Let us be entirely frank: Leaving out actual genius, if there is any such thing really, and using simply the word "knack," nine times out of ten the success of a writer—if it comes quickly and easily—is due to his

particular knack for writing a particular type of story. It is scarcely ever due to the beginning writer's having studied any book on writing. When I tell you this, those others who write books on how to write will not be angry. They will confidently grin and even enjoy what I say, knowing as they do (and as I do—I wouldn't doublecross my own mob—) that the law of averages will, every minute, give them the same protection it affords circus proprietors and evangelists. It isn't the writers of books for writers who will be angry with me; it will be other writers—because of at least two apparently harmless tips I have in this book given you. They will be angry, like all business men, at the possibility of more competition. But I don't think either one of these tips will do you a bit of good if you haven't got guts; and if you have, you've got a right to muscle into our racket, overcrowded as it is. Those who write nothing but books for writers don't know of these two things; real writers who sometimes write books for writers do not, or at least so far have not, included them in their works.

Don't misunderstand me; I am not more honest than my fellows. I merely think I can make more money by being terribly frank and honest in this book, since it will be such a new departure. If I didn't think so, I, too, would write a sophistical book on writing for you.

Many sex stories are treatment stories. One of the finest short stories written since De Maupassant appeared a number of years ago. It was entitled, if I re-

member correctly: "After He Had Gone." The author was Dorothy Dow. There was no plot, no formula; no beginning, end or sides. In it a man had seen his mistress for the last time. He had gone, and he wasn't coming back. The story simply gave the reaction of his mistress to this situation; its whole effectiveness lay in the way Miss Dow treated the subject matter.

That is the sort of thing which can, occasionally, be sold to the Quality Group of magazines, and to the short lived aesthetic journals that pay nothing.

Unless you are going into writing as an avocation, or to prove that superiority you entertain which the world refuses to acknowledge, you will do well not to attempt such writing except in the confession magazines, where the vastly different sort of treatment I described is called for. If you are further interested in actual "treatment" stories, Vincent Starrett wrote a book full of the finest ever done in this country entitled, "Coffins For Two." (Covici-McGee)

chapter - -

X

NOTION STORIES

"Titian or Renoir, the Song of Solomon or Jane Eyre, Mozart or Annie Laurie, the loveliness is all interwoven with sex appeal, sex stimulus, call it what you will. Even Michael Angelo, who rather hated sex, can't help filling the Cornucopia with phallic acorns."

D. H. LAWRENCE

"NOTION" STORIES, AS AUTHORS SOMETIMES call them, completely abandon the fundamental formula—that is, the juxtaposition of characters, the delayed cohesion, the complication, the surprise or satisfying ending.

They are hard to sell, but many get sold; I have sold dozens; and they can be sold to magazines that usually specialize in formula stories, as well as to the Quality Group, and, in fact, to almost any sort of periodical or newspaper syndicate. They are *never* as easy to sell as formula stories, in any market.

I wrote a job lot of them, that I could sell nowhere to periodicals; but in book form, under the title, "Evangelical Cockroach," they are now in a fifth edition, after some years, and still selling—and publishers, save the one who took a chance on the book for me, assured me gravely that the book could not be made to sell a thousand copies, no matter how much publicity was expended upon it. It still sells with *no* publicity expended upon it, no advertising. I tell you this only that you may begin to form, at the outset of your writing, an opinion as to the value of book publisher's judgments.

And, by the way, "Evangelical Cockroach" is not at all necessary as a text book in connection with this book; you can find more and better notion stories easily; there are some superior ones in Mr. Michael Arlen's volume "These Charming People," which made a fortune, despite all American publishers' insistence that books of short stories never do well.

Incidentally, the *average* volume of short stories sells more copies than the *average* novel; another earnest for you bearing upon the acuity of publishers. They will tell you flatly that books of short stories "never sell."

My, what a digression; let's get back—to the "notion" story:

To again advert to Dorothy Dow (with whose work I happen to have an unusual familiarity) one of the best notion stories I ever saw was one of hers entitled: "The Worst Thing That Could Happen To A Woman."

It appeared some years ago in one of the better sex magazines.

The story opened in a hospital room, wherein lay a young woman dying of pneumonia. (Sex magazines do not taboo death by disease as do almost all of the large popular magazines.)

The young woman was reasonably pretty. She was a charity patient in the hospital; had been brought in off the streets when she had dropped from hunger, exhaustion and the pneumonia.

As she lay dying, she was attended by a nurse, new to such work. The young nurse was pretty. Painfully the patient manages to inform the nurse that the worst thing has happened to her that could possibly happen to a woman.

The story is cleverly built up as to character detail, stage setting and atmosphere; the reader's interest is piqued and held by this strange secret about the worst thing that could happen to a woman, which the dying girl has promised to impart to the nurse. Miss Dow very cleverly takes advantage of the pique and interest held by the promise of this revelation to draw out the story to just the proper length that may be supportable with such a tenuous notion. And this, in itself, is quite a nice trick which takes infinite knack or practised skill. If such a story is drawn out too long, the reader gets tired of it; if it is not drawn out long enough, the author gets less money for the story, since editors insanely pay by the word instead of by the story, therefore putting a

premium upon padding. (And then they scold you bitterly and call all characterization and practically everything but action and dialogue "padding.")

At the end just before the girl dies (don't ask me how the girl could talk when she was dying of pneumonia; but Miss Dow was a trained nurse and must have had her facts reasonably straight) she whispers to the avid young nurse:

"I am dying. I know it. . . . The worst thing has happened to me that could possibly happen to a woman. *I am dying a virgin.*"

Many magazine editors would call this not a story at all, but an anecdote. When they did so, they would calmly ignore the fact that many of the greatest of the world's acknowledged fine short stories are in the same form as this story of Miss Dow's. Editors, by the way, calmly ignore all facts which contravene whatever dicta they, with almost religious fervor and bigotry, happen to patronize.

Editors who would call Miss Dow's story an anecdote would give as a reason for doing so the fact that in the story there is no "conflict," and no overcoming of an obstacle. And they may be right; it is a widely controversial matter; but in my humble opinion such dicta are an indication of what Doctor Overstreet would call "infantilism."

In order to write a notion story—that is, a story built around an odd notion, you must, obviously, have the

odd notion. And it must be a fairly good and original one, even for a commercial magazine.

Most free lance racketeers, instead of writing notion stories—knowing them to be hard to sell—twist and distort and rearrange the notion until they somehow screw and hammer it into a story formula. Any hard working successful hack can take that notion of Miss Dow's and make of it anything from a thousand word tabloid story to a hundred thousand word novel; Miss Dow used it for exactly what it was worth and made a perfect thing of its kind out of it.

Most notion stories, I fancy, evolve somewhat thus in the author's mind; at least they do in mine:

De Maupassant once wrote a gorgeous notion story called (in the Knopf edition in Ernest Boyd's translation): "An Idyll."

When I read the story, it seemed to me clear that De Maupassant had written it shortly after a railway journey. In France the cars are built differently from those in America. They have compartments, into which passengers are dangerously locked, while the train is in motion. I dare say De Maupassant was locked into a compartment with a woman having huge breasts. He looked at her, and his agile mind quickly acted. Probably nothing at all happened, during De Maupassant's railway journey that day, other than that he arrived at his destination, the compartment was unlocked, and he went off to keep a hot date somewhere, while the woman went her way.

But he *imagined* what *might* have happened if, in the compartment with the woman, there should have been a man who was on the verge of actual starvation. He imagined that perhaps the woman was a wet nurse by profession, and that her breasts were overfull, and, overfull, aching and distressing her. . . . What a story resulted! Read it by all means, and note De Maupassant's masterful technique in bringing out everything that the story was worth, without putting an overplus word into it.

The great danger in connection with notion stories is that they will begin to come to you in profusion, after you have started to write, and your subconscious mind has set itself to see bits of business and variations for stories everywhere. You will have to arrive at some sense of skill in detecting which notion is best for a notion story, and which is best merely for a variation or a bit of business in a formula story.

You will be tempted to write *endless* notion stories, because they are far easier to write than formula stories. If you do, you will not only pile up your traffic with a lot of stories hard to sell, but you will start the devastating habit of mental and manual laziness, which is the greatest single foe with which the neophyte writer must contend. . . . Especially if he has been in the past working under a boss who saw that he got to work at a given time, put in a given number of hours—and, if there was any way to cheat him out of it—some overtime.

Once you become your own boss you have a vast set of new conditionings to set up; old ones to overcome; the change from job to free lance racketeer involves a stupendous readjustment in personal habits. Many free lance writers who have knack and skill and determination fail, even after they have developed a practice, merely because they cannot force themselves to work, with no boss over them to see that they get a reasonable amount of plain hard work done each day.

Worse, the new free lance author's own mind will trick him in this respect. When he was on the payroll of some Babbitt, he developed, in sheer self-defense to keep from being worked into a nervous breakdown or tuberculosis, a method of devious "stalling" on the job, which fooled the boss and gave him mental or physical rest from the average employer's selfish desire to milk as much labor as possible for as little as possible out of his employees, in the name of Holy "Service"!

This mental conditioning will be strong in you; you'll develop ways to cheat yourself, just as you cheated the boss, and unless you are most alert, you won't catch yourself at it.

One of the most frequent of these developments is slight headaches.

"I can't work this morning. I've got a headache; and surely nobody could do work worth while with a headache."

The Christian Scientists will tell you that there is no sensation in matter and that there is no such thing as a

headache, because there is no such thing as a head, or a human being, or anything at all—for All is God, and God is All; therefore, since you have no head, no You, no nothing, how can there be a headache in what isn't . . . and so on.

The psychologists will tell you that it is perfectly possible to develop "psychic" headaches, which have no foundation whatever in functional or physiological matters.

Society women develop them at the time of morning when it is necessary to confer with the butler concerning household arrangements. Lazy executives get them when there is no conference at which to loaf, and exacting duties call.

Of course you may develop real functional headaches when you consecrate yourself to art and remain planted before a typewriter; but this will not be because of an overuse of your brain. It will be because of far more practical matters.

If the headaches are only mild ones which fade when you get to work, ignore them, or gobble up a couple of aspirin tablets. Why in Heaven's name an aspirin tablet should cure a psychic headache I can't imagine. But doctors, you know, have a pill they call a "placebo" which they give to hypochondriacs. Placebos have been known to cure almost everything not calling for downright surgical attention; and a placebo is composed of flour and water, tinted.

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XI

CHARACTER STORIES

"I should hardly think it is sensible to suffer the pains of creation just for money or the mild pleasures of praise."

WILLIAM BOLITHO

CHARACTER STORIES ARE OF TWO KINDS. The first sort relate back to Mr. Nichols' opinion as to what constitutes a perfect short story . . . an almost perfectly unsalable short story, in fact, and we need not go into them here, since if you can write them you can, and if you can't you can't, no, not with the help of all the king's horses and all the king's men.

The other kind of character stories, those, for instance, of the sort Mr. P. G. Wodehouse writes, bear almost no relation whatsoever to any other sort of story mentioned so far in this recondite rondo. Formula, story, even bits of business, variations, notions matter nothing. All that is necessary is a unique character. Not a character, you understand, of true literary worth (whatever that is), at least not necessarily; but a char-

acter so outstanding, so original and so unusual that *anything* the character does is news. For some reason which I am not entirely able to fathom, being only a mildly quick witted fellow, P. G. Wodehouse addicts will howl with laughter if his character lights a cigarette in the same way anyone else would light a cigarette. You've seen the same thing in vaudeville. You have seen a good comedian coax a gale of laughter from his audience by grinning vacuously at them and saying or doing nothing but that.

There is marvelous pay dirt in character stories. One good character has fixed many an author who could not write at all for life, and will again, many, many times; and for every one such, thousands upon thousands of authors have invented characters for character stories that flopped dismally, even if they were good; in some instances far better than characters which were sustaining their authors in Dusenberg motor cars and wenches of Follies calibre (.22, short).

If you think you have a really good character, one good enough to support a story when there is no story there to support, by all means write the story. *That* will probably be all which will be required to disillusion you. If, however, you remain muddy but unbowed, send the story off to an editor.

No editor will refuse to consider a character story. Of course you understand by this time that you ought very carefully to consider the particular type of magazine or group of magazines which might buy the par-

ticular sort of character story you have written. In fact, you should have had a pretty definite idea as to what magazine, or group of magazines, you were going to send your character story to before writing it at all.

If editorial reaction to your character story is thoroughly negative, one of two things has happened: either the story has been read and rejected, or it has just been rejected. It is true, and there is no getting away from it, that there is a definite hazard in most editorial offices that stories from unknown authors will not get read at all. I tell you this not in order to make you think about turning on the gas, but to make you realize that one rejection, or ten, or an hundred, doesn't necessarily prove that a character story is worthless. Despite all of the gloomy matters I have mercilessly limned throughout this dank tome, new free lance writers do get themselves across every month; and new character stories get sold, creating a demand for more stories containing the same character.

After having written your character story, do turn to some other kind of story until someone able to write checks has evinced such an encouraging interest in the first one as to justify your doing more.

There is heavy competition in the character story, because such stories almost write themselves; there is no technique, no formula, nothing at all to go on.

The character is brought out upon the stage, along with what are called in vaudeville: "Straight Men." He is moved around; caused to utter things "in character."

Look closely, in this particular, at Mr. Wodehouse. His character turns to the butler and says:

"Jeeves, my panties."

Jeeves brings the fowl his panties, and they are put on just as pants are put on by men in other stories. Mind you—the very fact that Mr. Wodehouse's character *does* put on his pants as any man would is uproariously funny to a Wodehouse enthusiast. Maybe *I'm* wrong. . . . No doubt it is because I have no sense of humor that Wodehouse stories only enrage me; but, at any rate, nobody on earth could explain the "technique" of a thing like that.

Nothing, I fancy, would puzzle and afflict Mr. Wodehouse more than to have some master technician explain in a book how the great Mr. Wodehouse writes character stories, and, far more interesting and technical, receives huge sums for them.

Such a book could be written—one hundred thousand words, at least, *cum notis variorum.* But Mr. Wodehouse, you can be certain, wouldn't be able to make head or tail out of it.

So in writing a character story, if you decide to—and for your own good I hope you don't try it unless there is a character in your mind that simply claws his way out upon paper—remember that all you have to do is dangle the character before the reader.

Do not confuse character stories with such stories as Mr. Chicken Sale's amazing performance in his booklet entitled "The Specialist." And, in passing, let us re-

member the American publishers' fiat about books of short stories not being salable; Mr. Sale published this story in book form himself, since he evidently knew of the American publisher's superior knowledge regarding the salability of short story books. I am told that fifty million copies of the book have been sold; following my invariable practice of discounting everything I hear ninety-nine percent, we arrive at the neat figure of 500,000 copies, which is an impressive figure, considering the fact that to the personal knowledge of American book publishers books of short stories don't sell.

But the Specialist is *not* a character story. It is vaudeville put down upon paper, and excellent vaudeville, because Mr. Sale was an excellent vaudeville performer. He knew, in short, what would get laughs. "The Specialist" is a humorous story; a type of story we will consider in this book no more than we shall the purely artistic short story, whatever that is. Either you can, or you can not write humor; there is every imaginable kind and quality of humor, from the cosmic humor of James Branch Cabell, to the slap stick humor of Mr. Sale, with Mr. Sale's variety always nearer to the cash register.

In the Wodehouse character story there is also humor, of Mr. Wodehouse's conception—and as to whether or not humor in Mr. Wodehouse's conception is humor at all there is wide controversy and I shall not give you my opinion. I have already, out of a sense of aching inferiority probably, insulted enough contemporary au-

thors in this volume; and I hear that Mr. Wodehouse, unlike his characters, is husky as all get out.

The difference between the purely humorous sort of thing Mr. Sale did, and the character story that Mr. Wodehouse does is plain. Mr. Sale built up "gag" after "gag" deliberately framing everything in the story to lead to a definite laugh at a definite point. For instance, Mr. Sale started his story with an idea which is in itself funny, for some reason far too deep for me: the building of a back house. To the peasant American a back house in itself is for some occult reason, *per se* funny. Then Mr. Sale thought to himself: this, that, and the other situation will be a good "laugh." With his laughs all lined up, he strung them together like firecrackers, laid the fuse, lit it with a brief opening, and the character carries the fire from cracker to cracker along the whole bunch of laughs. (If you want to see this same thing done in the novel form, look at any of Mr. Thorne Smith's novels—Doubleday Doran.) Mr. Wodehouse does nothing of the sort. If you were to select Mr. Sale's "laughs" from his story, take them out of their context and consider them singly, one by one, providing you have the Orpheum Circuit sense of humor, they will be funny, story or no story.

If you take Mr. Wodehouse's laughs out of his story, isolate them, and scrutinize them, nobody would see anything funny or intelligent or even coherent about them.

Mr. Wodehouse' *character* is the gag. The character

carries the pyrotechnics. Like those sulphur balls unwhipped brats bounce on cement sidewalks on the Fourth of July, wherever you bounce Mr. Wodehouse's character, even though you bounce him upon a thing as static as a cement sidewalk, or a copy of *Gone With the Wind*, there are sparks. And so it will be with any character you invent, if it is a good character.

By good, I do not mean good at all; I mean apposite. Character stories are to be found in every possible type of magazine; and while, for some reason, the comedy character almost always predominates, there need be no element of humor at all.

There are, in the western story magazines, characters as devoid of humor as what ministers call "Good Clean Fun." You all remember the characters Jesse James, Diamond Dick, etc., etc. The general impression was that the Jesse James character, around which one man wrote at least a billion words of fiction, had something to do with *the* Jesse James, notorious western bandit. This character had little to do with the real Jesse James; though there was certainly a real Jesse James, and he was certainly a bandit. (What turned me into a cynic, and caused me to write always as sourly as I do was my discovery, years ago, that Captain Kidd was really no pirate at all; since then I have distrusted Revealed Religion, advertising matter and even amateur athletics.)

In the long series of stories written around the Jesse James character there was no attempt at planned story,

with opening, complication, suspense, trick close. Anything that Jesse James did was news, because the character was a brand new one and caught the American imagination—nay, world wide imagination—at once.

I shall never forget the last Jesse James story I ever read. In it the puissant Mr. James, of Missouri, was pursued without pause. He lost his guns. He lost his horse, his knives, black jacks, sling shots, bean shooters, spears, bows and arrows, everything. I like to died of breathlessness. Here was a new Jesse James situation. Always before Jesse had been left some one weapon. Jesse was backed into a corner. Dozens of men armed to the teeth surrounded him. What the *hell* was Jesse to do now? Could it have been possible that all along the author had been fooling us about Jesse James? Was it Mr. James's ordnance that was formidable, and not Jesse? No indeed! A good character writer never fails his customers. Because of Jesse James's reputation, the pack of howling sheriffs surrounding him were afraid. They feared some trick. At last, however, one of their number, bolder than the rest,—(there is always one bolder than the rest,)—reached for Jesse. Jesse smashed him on the jaw, knocked him down, grabbed him by the feet, and using him as a weapon beat off the rest until his trusty companions (who were anything but trusty really, since they were always late to denouements) came upon the scene.

How I wish I had that story. I think I bought it for a cent. I'd rather have it now than a first edition of Poe's Tamerlane; there was far more imagination in it.

There are character stories in sex magazines; girls who react in a typical and characteristic way to old situations; in sport story magazines, even in the puking religious story magazines. And wherever you see such a character established, you see an author cashing in very, very easily. It is easy to cash in on a pearl—after you have found the pearl.

Of course it must be obvious to you by this time how best to get a character for a character story. . . . Some eccentric, or funny, or exaggerated, or puissant, or outré person you see in life.

An individual whose actions and speeches, for some reason, impress observers and hearers beyond the true interest lying in these actions and speeches.

Watch the person carefully; heighten and sharpen his peculiar antics. Then try him out on paper, paying no attention to story formulas or bits of business, being careful to spice well with dialogue to break up the pages into snappy, readable print format. If there is any possible way to avoid it do not imitate the character's speech to the point of needing to mutilate words. Try to get his idiom without misspelling words. Nothing annoys the average reader more than "dialect," and I don't blame him; it is hard enough to master the patter called English, customarily spoken by Americans.

Many stories and books full of dialect have sold for good prices and many will again—but they always sell in spite of the dialect; so why carry any extra tonnage in the way of sales resistance in your story?

chapter--

XII

"FOLLOW THROUGH" STORIES

"Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces."

VIRGINIA WOOLF

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS FOOD AND drink and shelter and murder and sex. And then came the professoriat and the priesthood, and there were calories and prohibition and Torrens Titles and Wars to make the World Safe for Democracy, and "love."

In the beginning a short story was a story that was short; and then came the prestidigitators and the technical tinkerers and the piddlers and the magicians with boxes having trick bottoms. . . . Obstacle boxes; conflict silk hats capable of producing endless bric-a-brac. Take my word for it—and I speak upon nothing at all controversial now, food is still food, drink is still drink, war is still murder, love is still sex, and a short story is still a story that is short. Acquaintances of mine, heavily educated, all wet from buckets of formal instruction

in composition poured over them, are stewing and sweating in the effort to achieve a novel and though I try desperately to help them do what they want to do—get any kind of a novel done and sell it—I cannot help them because they are only a few years out of college and will have to dry off.

"Follow Through" stories, as some authors call them, cover the whole field of the short story and the novel, as well as the play and motion picture. Back of them is the theory that every reader selects some one character in a story, identifies himself with this character—through a process which the psychologists would call "projection"—and *becomes* that character while he reads the story, or watches the play.

At first flush this theory seems greatly ingenious, and when I attack it, I approach a highly controversial matter upon which I vouchsafe only my humble, if, as usual, somewhat strident opinion. On the subject I would be outvoted by most of my writing friends, many of whom never write anything without this "follow through" principle; without providing a character with which the average reader will identify himself. Most editors approve the theory. Many of them will buy no story that fails obviously to embody it. Often, if you do not include a character who can be followed through by the reader and adopted as "I" by him, you will get a note back from editors saying something like: "There is no character in this story with whom the reader can identify himself."

The editor will not say "average" reader; but of course that will be what he means. He will mean the average reader who is moved almost to tears by "Mammy" songs, even though his own mother still lives on Tenth Avenue, cooking on a two plate burner while he lives with his wife on Park Avenue.

He will mean the average reader who listens over the radio to stuffed shirts reading speeches written for them by ghost writers who held their noses with one hand and typed with the other.

He means the average reader who goes to the movies to sit wrapt and all but hypnotized, convinced that the stuff he sees on the screen represents what life means to many and may well someday mean to him.

He means the average reader who believes what he reads and goes on year after year submitting to the most outrageous tyranny that the world has ever known, under the fond delusion that it is Democracy.

He means the average reader who stands with heart thumping to watch a parade of Knights of Columbus or Knights Templar, disguised as fairies with feathers in their hats, and, at an average age of forty-five, applauds and cheers.

He means the average reader who believes that there is an old gentleman in a night shirt, vaguely resident in Heaven, who scrutinizes the actions of everyone on this earth with a microscopic and implacably petty severity, making debit and credit entries in supernal ledgers as

against that time when the average reader will die and go up for audit.

The reason why I do not favor the follow through story principle, and never write such stories, is that I simply do not believe that even the average reader always identifies himself with a character and follows him through the story, living, by projection, in the character.

I believe, on the contrary, that the average reader enjoys just as much, a character whom he could not possibly follow through; a character doing something that the average reader wouldn't even want to do.

The average theatre goer enjoys upon the stage accomplishments in which he would not wish to share. He enjoys them, in fact, because of their novelty and their complete *disassociation* from anything connected with his life.

I don't believe that the average vaudeville patron who applauds a trained dog act identifies himself with the dog any more than a magazine reader identifies himself with a Negro pearl diver who bites sharks under water.

Follow through principles, it seems to me, are something grafted on by the professoriat of writing. Trace back through literature to the great things written before such stuffy pedantic matters were ever promulgated; look, even, at the early things that had no literary life but which sold enormously well in their time.

In them you will find both every proof, and every lack of proof, that the follow through way is the right

way for all True Believers. . . . Just as, in the Bible, you can both prove that everything that is naturally pleasurable is sinful, and then, by turning to the Song of Solomon, or dozens of other places in the Bible, immediately prove, just as soundly, that God himself, vocative through a ghost writer, enthusiastically recommended all of those things which the preachers (not all of them any more) tell us are sins.

The trouble with this whole follow through theory is that it is just a theory; just another one of those pedagogical, bookish things to complicate matters and confuse you.

A short story is still a story that is short. I know it is downright heretical to make things so lucid; but if you are displeased with my heresy you can find books that will make of the short story a thing so convoluted that you will never have the hardihood to try to write one at all. And you can, I am very sure, easily write and even sell short stories, if you are determined to do so and have at least sufficient mentality to make your way about upon the public thoroughfares without a nurse.

chapter--

XIII

THEME STORIES

"Man is a museum of diseases, a home of impurities; he comes today and is gone tomorrow; he begins as dirt and departs as stench."

MARK TWAIN

THIS TYPE OF STORY OCCUPIES ABOUT the same position of dignity on the story type menu as spinach upon a Grand Hotel menu.

Theme stories are written not around an objective notion, character or life situation, but around an abstraction.

If they are intended to be sold for money to American magazines, the theme is usually the same; it is: "Life is earnest, life is real, and death is not the goal." Anyone with any sense knows that life is chaos, that it is ridiculous, and that it ends in death; few people of any intelligence believe that there is anything following death. That is why the "Life is earnest, life is real and death is not the goal" theme is so popular with most

mushy minded readers, which is to say, most readers. They "escape" from life in the story, and are even temporarily fooled by it, if it is a good story, into believing its implications. In other words they take a shot of dope, which makes them feel better for awhile.

Any of the other types of stories I have outlined to you may be combined with the theme story, with only the difference that the character, or idea, or complication, or trick ending is made subordinate to the theme. A clever writer causes the theme to be implicit not obviously; a clumsy writer causes it to be as obvious as perfume by Woolworth in a closed taxi. When this latter is done, it is said that the "plumbing" shows in your story.

Other themes always good (though theme stories are harder to sell than the straight elemental love story first outlined to you) are:

"That in brushes with foreigners, Americans are always right."

"That a person who practices what is supposed to be sin, gets it in the neck in the end."

"That one who practices what is thought to be virtue always is rewarded."

"That it is better to be a dead hero than a live coward." And so on, *ad nauseam*.

It is not, strangely enough, only in puking religious magazines that such theme stories often find lodgment for cash. Even such well paying mediums as the *American Magazine* go in for them heavily; though, of course,

a plausibility must be provided in a magazine that pays as well as does the *American Magazine* that need not appear in a cheaper publication. (Those who believe names have something to do with personal success will be interested to know that the name of the editor of the *American Magazine* is Sumner Blossom.)

Of course the opposite to all this gloom perfuming theme writing is the ironical and the satirical. If you are a person of the slightest intelligence you will have a hard time keeping satire and irony from subtly coloring your short length work. If you are very clever and not merely one of those who adopt a pose in sneering at the life of which you are afraid, you may be able to do what S. S. Van Dine did. He wrote masterful detective-mystery novels that are livid satires on the usual mystery-detective novel and got away with it. Fooled even those greatest of self-confirmed wiseacres, the literary critics.

But here you run into the greatest single danger the free lance fictioneer faces. Almost all magazine editors loathe satire and irony. Book editors usually do not mind it, and often welcome it. Magazine editors can spot satire and irony instantly, even if it exists only between the lines of a story. One of the hardest things you will have to learn to do, if you are a person of exceptional intelligence, is inhibit all tinge of satire and irony from your short commercial work. It is absolute poison in the commercial fiction field. You may have to practice for long before you get the subconscious

satirical or ironical slant out of your writing. One way to get it out is to completely eschew reading satire or irony. I have known good commercial writers to be estopped for weeks from writing salable material because of having read one such magnificent book as Norman Douglas's "South Wind."

You may say to yourself that you will not write with obvious satirical or ironical intent, but that you will, on the surface, write a story for morons to read in the *Post* and elsewhere, and beneath the story float a modicum of irony and satire that the sophisticated reader will detect and enjoy. This you positively cannot do. To expect sophisticated readers with cultured minds to read the *Saturday Evening Post* at all for any reason whatsoever is the same as to expect readers of Dr. Frank Crane to enjoy Nietzsche; so they will never discover how clever you have been; but even if you succeed in fooling an editor with one such story, you will be caught sooner or later and all editors will fear to trust you. A number of times clever writers have put over this sort of thing, and have suffered, often for years afterward, as the result. Editors are suspicious of everything such an author writes and are constantly on the lookout for him to put something over again.

The Harrison Anti-narcotic law certainly ought to cover theme stories; but it doesn't—and until it does, stick to straight dope in your theme stories if they are for popular consumption in the average commercial magazine. In fact, if you write iconoclastic material at

all, for any reason, it will very likely creep into your other commercial work, much to the detriment of its sales value.

Almost every amateur writer writes the theme story below at least once. It is a favorite with students who have graduated from English five, and who consider themselves very serious minded because they do not neck like the other students or go to football games. When editors reject the story, they (the students) placidly reflect that it is because editors are anaesthetic to real beauteh, which is the outgrowth—as shown in the story —of the futility and strange mystery of life.

Here is the story; now, gawdarnyuh! don't write it in *any* form:

A criminal strives desperately to escape being electrocuted by the state; he succeeds, and as he leaves the penitentiary with his pardon in his hand is run over and killed by a T model Ford, vintage 1910.

As to religious stories. . . .

With Tennyson I believe that, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds," and the whole body of organized religion is to me just another racket, and the cheapest and most despicable racket on earth, since by it children are mulcted of their pennies and given hideous fears to warp their little lives in return. However, I have in the past sold to many of the religious story magazines for the prices they habitually pay when I wanted some easy dough quickly. Of them one thing is certain; you will

never sell *any* religious magazine unless you glance through it. There are, of course, monstrous differences in these magazines, as between tweedledum and tweedledee, and you've got to know those differences. It's easy enough to locate them by glancing through a given magazine. Before I discovered this I got the shock of my life from the D. W. Cook Publishing Company in Elgin, Illinois, who publish a number of magazines for little children desirous of going to Heaven by giving up their chewing gum money for heathens who have no electric chairs in their countries.

I wrote what seemed to me a lovely little Pollyanna story about a nice little girl who had a window half way up her stairs wherein was stained glass. There were various colors in this stained glass; by looking through the indigo she could see the world outside as blue, or by looking through the pink—but I won't pain you farther (I finally sold the story, by the way, to a religious magazine other than one of D. W. Cook's.) In the end the little girl was rewarded for being a nice little girl by being taken to a circus.

What was my amazement to get a note from some editor at the Cook company to the effect that they considered theatrical entertainments and circuses not wholesome for children, and therefore . . .

. . . There are certainly still sufficient reasons in the world for the weeping of Jesus—!

Aside from this one moot point with the religious magazines, they may be dealt with as are all other mag-

azines, sold every type of sex story I have mentioned here, masked by whatever slant the particular magazine adopts. With the average magazine you can get by again and again with stories that are not written individually for them and slanted directly at them—most of the stories I have sold have been completely unslanted stories, in fact—but with a religious magazine you must write for one magazine only, and either tear the story up when it is rejected or completely rewrite it with a new slant before again sending it out.

It is a rotten market; the effect upon one's character of writing such drivel is appalling, and the highest I ever got for a religious story of any length was ten dollars. These folk are great at sending out appeals for dough; but try to get any out of *them*—!

chapter--

XIV

NEWSPAPER AND MAGAZINE FEATURES

"The penny paper that may be bought everywhere, that is allowed to lie on every table, prints seven or eight columns of filth, for no reason except that the public likes to read filth; the poet and novelist must emasculate and destroy their work because . . . Who shall come forward and make answer?"

GEORGE MOORE

IF YOU HAVE NO CONTACT AT ALL WITH newspaper matters, you will be surprised, nay, amazed, to find, if you ever murder anyone, or get murdered by anyone, what an enormous significance your address has to a newspaper man. You live, whether you think of it that way or not, at a "good" address, a "bad" address, or a "medium" address. These addresses which have such enormous significance in the minds of newspaper men have nothing to do with localities, or square city blocks; they have significances within themselves. I have

seen publicity hounds make every imaginable attempt to interest a reporter or a sub editor, and fail from the start because of their address. I have seen the flicker of uninterest come to a newspaper man's eyes or seen a flicker that expanded into pyrotechnics, not at what some person said, but merely over an address they mentioned.

For instance, a girl raped on the *west* side of Chicago, would be a matter of little interest to a newspaper man; but a girl raped on certain sections of Park Avenue in New York, would, with the exception of certain groups of addresses there, bring out batteries of camera men. *And it might be the same girl.*

Why am I going into all this? Simply to show you how complicated is the matter of newspaper feature writing, and to persuade you that you must *always* query an editor before planning a newspaper serial. When you query him and tell him you are an author yearning to turn your gifts toward newspaper feature writing; when you tell him the subject of the feature which you intend illuminating with your prose he will very much embarrass you (providing the idea interests him in the least) by asking if you have, or can get photographs. If you have, for instance, seen God or Jesus at a movie, this is news, there is no question about it; if you happen to be a multimillionaire, it is the sort of news that any newspaper will print—but even if you are a multimillionaire, and the thing is news, it wouldn't be worth a nickel, as a feature, without photographs

. . . or at least legible drawings. There are several important things about both newspaper and magazine feature writing, and I shall list them in the order of their importance:

(1) Pictures.
(2) An idea that is "newsy."
(3) Pictures.
(4) The ability to write succinctly.
(5) Pictures.
(6) A query responded to by an editorial O. K.
(7) Pictures.

If you want to go into the newspaper feature story racket from the syndicate angle, you can only write features, send twice as many pictures as pages of prose, submit to the various syndicates, and maintain the frame of mind had and held by a man who is watching a ball romp around a roulette wheel. That is the way those of my acquaintance who now do a mild cash and carry business in syndicate features landed.

If you want to contact some paper direct, you can, of course, ask for a job. If you have influence, or are willing to work for almost nothing and they happen to need a man, you may get the job. Or, if you really have a flair for newspaper feature work (here again you should refer to the textbooks I have constantly recommended—the publications themselves), you can go at the matter this way, and have an *excellent* chance of succeeding at once.

Unearth an idea somewhat, loosely speaking, like the general run of ideas used by the feature editors of the papers in your town. (If you wish to play to papers in other cities your chances of getting your submissions read are practically nil.) Go out and apply your nose to the idea in direct contact. If it is slightly odoriferous it may be a good newspaper idea. (Hence the saying, a nose for news.) If it is an idea not sufficiently original to perplex or annoy the average newspaper feature editor, write about the length of words concerning it that the editor usually requires for the features he runs.

Then take ever so many pictures; or get them; or if you are an artist—I mean if you *are*—draw them. (Good, sharp, contrasty line drawings sometimes go well.)

Thus fortified, go to the feature editor, or the editor who doubles in brass as feature editor and say: (Oh *never never* that you have a feature or an article)

"Look at these picks."

(If you say picks he may be temporarily fooled into thinking you are a newspaper man, unless you have an honest face.)

Newspaper men are constitutionally unable to refrain from looking at picks; in this respect they have all the vim of an American deacon in Paris, offered postcards by street vendors.

When the editor has suspiciously glanced at the pictures, he will look up at you and growl:

"Whatsa racket, buddy?"

He'll be tough as all get out; but don't be frightened. Newspaper men are the greatest sentimentalists and fall guys on earth—they look and act tough because in stories and plays newspaper men look and act tough. Say then, very humbly:

"The idea's no good, is it?"

This will completely unseat his reason. Completely at sea he'll probably snort:

"Well, it *ain't* so hot, but I don't know but what we might use it. Why didn't you write something about it?"

At this point produce your manuscript, which you have up to the present moment carefully concealed. Hand it to him and say:

"You'll probably have to check on it and rewrite it—those are just rough ideas."

He'll look over your rough ideas. He'll say something like:

"Jesus—this is awful; we gotta rewrite it all." Then you say, humbly:

"I expected that."

Then be silent.

After mighty frowns and a long silence, and as though he were being racked by thumb screws he will finally say:

"What's the junk worth to you, buddy?"

Say: "Give me space rates on it."

This will perplex him sore. He'll think you know something about newspaper work if you ask for space rates; yet he'll know on the other hand that if you really

did know anything about space rates you'd ask for a flat rate for the feature. He'll, in perplexity, fetch up a pretty good space rate check for it—you'll lose, in one way, since he would have paid you more if he gave you a flat rate; but by doing this you have practically tricked the man into hiring you; because, having received space rates once, he will consider you as vaguely attached to his office without any salary; then you can go after more features on space rates. And here is the joker:

Approaching him in this way you will be able to get him to print a lot of your stuff (he'll print what you give him almost verbatim no matter how much he growls about revising it) and then it's up to you. If you've got knack, and your stuff goes over, your next move is plain. You go to the opposition paper and get a flat rate bid for your next feature; you go back to your first editor and make him better the bid, or else. And that, so help me God, is the way to go into the newspaper feature business. Books or no books, that is the way people actually get into it.

So far as the actual writing of a newspaper feature is concerned, the matter becomes no more complicated than the writing of articles of any kind . . . which is to say themes, or, as the schoolmarms put it: "Compositions." You can get books on newspaper feature writing, if you like; however, it might be best to study newspaper feature writing direct from newspaper features, because the two things are as widely separated as a lecture

on economics and a back room debate on a municipal budget.

In magazine feature writing a great deal more care must be taken with the actual writing—that it not be too sloppy; though there, too, pictures are of the essence. If you don't know anything about photography or engraving, may I be so inane as to explain that a small photograph can be "blown up" to almost any size, and a large one can be engraved on a space the size of a dime. Don't send water color pictures to a magazine editor unless you know something about engraving and reproduction; but almost any sort of photographs can be bundled along.

If I were here to set down instructions for writing magazine feature articles, I should run into the same slapstick comedy all other writers of books for writers do, because you could turn to the magazines, the month my book was published, and find every suggestion I had made violated in practically every magazine that month. Magazine feature writing is plain theme writing; composition, to be slanted after the manner of the magazine at which the article is aimed, and produced with whatever individual mannerisms you dare indulge. In most cases it is best to query magazine editors before sending in feature articles; in your query mention and describe the photographs first—or send the photographs themselves. Few magazines will steal or lose them; they don't need to, they can buy them for next to nothing. In fact they can buy them for nothing by writing you a letter

saying that your article is accepted and will be paid for on publication.

Nowadays when a magazine says it will pay you on publication, it means that the printer owns the joint, that there is no money in it, and that you might just as well forget the whole matter. "Payment on Publication" is a form of theft, unfortunately permitted by law. The Authors' League is working desperately on the matter now. Authors have been robbed of millions during the past four years by "Payment on Publication."

The writing of either newspaper feature articles or magazine feature articles is not writing at all in the free lance fiction racket conception of writing. It is in no sense creative. It is a form of newspaper reporting; and the best thing, by far, to do, if you want to indulge in any form of newspaper reporting, is to get a job on a newspaper; you won't ever make any money, but you'll have a hell of a lot of fun.

chapter--

XV

AGENTS

"To market, to market, a gallop, a trot,
To buy some meat to put in a pot;
Five cents a quarter, ten cents a side.
If it hadn't been killed,
it must have died."

MOTHER GOOSE

GENERALLY SPEAKING, NO AGENT CAN sell written material that is not salable. I say this because many tyro writers think for some strange reason that an agent can do this. There is no very great difference between a literary agent and any other kind of agent. They operate in much the same way as a real estate agent, and for much the same reason.

I have told you frankly that there is a very real hazard that your stories will not be read at all in a great many quarters. And this is no matter of my personal opinion; I know it, upon indisputable evidence, to be a fact—and there is a greater hazard in this direction right now than there ever was before.

Consider this situation, for instance:

A magazine editorial office habitually buys most of its material from a group of agents and writers whom it favors. Editors buy the next smaller group of material from authors introduced by other authors, or from authors known to them because of their work in other magazines.

Their smallest amount of purchased material is from the mass of what they call "runrush mail": stories sent in by amateurs and others from all over the country. In order to find usable stories in this ruck it is necessary for the editorial office to read hundreds of stories to find one. Even granted that that one may be a masterpiece, the greatest story ever published in the magazine; granted that it may be the first story of another O. Henry—and God forbid—it is going to cost them, in office overhead, an appalling amount of money to find that one story. In editorial offices they don't look for it very hard any more. A good reader, a man of discernment, education, and ability predicated upon long experience will nowadays cost at least $15.00 per week. An extra good one might come as high as $25.00 per week. (In 1929 they used to command all sorts of fancy salaries, up to thirty-five and thirty-seven fifty per week.) First rate editors can be had for forty dollars a week. Few editors, except those on the larger slick paper magazines, get beyond seventy-five dollars per week.

But an editorial office must have other help. Stenographers, office boys. A stenographer worth anything to

an editor will command about thirty-five dollars per week. She will have to know how to spell, and not one stenographer in ten thousand knows how to do that. A trustworthy office boy, one that won't lose proofs and made up pages, on the way to and from the printer, also comes high . . . around fifteen dollars per week. And it is hard to find good office boys and stenographers. Good copyreaders can be picked up any time.

Now, you see, if a magazine that is having a hard time keeping out of the red employs half a dozen readers to plow through the "unrush" it gets every day, the business manager will come upstairs and make the windows rattle. The editor will explain:

"But there might be another O. Henry first story in that bunch of unrush mail."

"I don't care if there's another Shakespeare in it," the business manager bellows. "Give it the bum's rush, or read it yourself; you got to bring down this overhead." Few editors dare speak disrespectfully to the business manager; the business manager and the advertising manager are the whole works; they draw down real salaries and are hard to come by; editors can be found anywhere.

So the editor of *Maidens Madness Magazine* decides to make a martyr of himself for art. Instead of hunting for swell dates in the evening, he will stay at the office, fire his readers, and read the whole unrush mail himself.

The first night while he is doing this, Mayme calls up; and, perversely—though she would never see eye to

eye with him before, when she finds that he is actually going to work instead of spend the evening trying to make her—she gives in. Ye editor pours the midnight oil into his spittoon and grabs a taxi. Next morning he shows up tired and ill humored. He scowls at four hundred pieces of unrush mail. He calls the office boy.

"Hey you!" he orders. "Open those envelopes. Put a rejection slip into the stories, and put the stories into the other envelope inside the first one. If there isn't any return envelope, print up a form on the multigraph and send the author a note requesting return postage."

Thus things go along for a few days until the editor gets peeved with his regular authors; when, for sheer meanness, he occasionally makes assaults upon the unrush mail, grabbing stories here and there and looking over the opening "narrative hooks" in them. If the narrative hook holds him for a second, he glances at the end of the story. Should he even mildly like the way it ends, he looks at three or four pages at the middle of the story, to see if the author is at least sufficiently coherent to be readable when patched up carefully. If he can, from the body of the story, puzzle out what the author is trying to say he sits down and, with every imaginable prejudice and bias against the story—since it is by someone he doesn't know and doesn't want to know—reads all through it.

He finds, perchance, that the author, instead of trying to write a pretentious masterpiece with a new idea in it, has capably filled out an old and safe formula with

reasonably fresh variations and bits of business. He grins fiendishly and reaches for his telephone. . . . Calls the agent who has been hi-jacking him for more money for each story of an author controlled by the agent and favored by the editor. The editor says, with delight, over the 'phone:

"Listen, Hunkins, I won't need that young love story for the November number from Wilberforce Penthovel. I'm returning it. I found a peach in today's mail that I can buy for two cents a word; I should pay you five!"

The agent is crestfallen, and decides to come down a cent for Wilberforce. The editor is also a bit frightened now at his own daring, but he sticks to his guns.

"All right," he agrees, "I'll look at something of Penthovel's for the December number, but I want to try out this new bird." (He wouldn't, by the way, call it the "December number," but rather the "December book." For some reason magazine editors call their magazines books; possibly because they wish they were.)

The agent, like all sorts of agents in every branch of business everywhere, suggests that all sorts of dire things may happen if the editor persists in exhibiting sales resistance. For one thing, Wilberforce may get sore and go to some other magazine—which is possible but not likely. Nevertheless the editor sticks to his un-American sales resistance, and sends a check for two cents a word to the unknown author.

He runs the story in his November "book." If readers are pleased, the editor whoops with joy and brags

about the matter as though he had himself written the story. He plays up "*His Discovery*" big, and fights him month by month as to increased word rates. If the new author who has been flattered by editorial recognition demands no increased word rates in his humble gratitude, the editor neglects to mention the matter as long as he dares and is delighted at the neat improvement in his editorial budget.

No, I am not kidding. That is a perfectly drawn picture as to absolute verisimilitude.

There is every imaginable sort of agent. I cannot, obviously, recommend any agent to you here; and if you write to me, I promise, faithfully, not to reply to you, if you ask for such information. Among authors there is no agreement at all as to agents. One author damns an agent that another swears by, and so on. They are as varied as doctors and lawyers, and the trick is to find an agent that suits your particular temperament, and who takes an especial interest in your work, even to the extent of trying to find markets you should write for and working you up for them.

In many ways an agent is a great help to even the beginning author who will have a hard time commanding the services of a good agent; for, after all, if an agent reads and purveys a dozen stories to take a ten percent commission on one sold for fifty dollars there isn't much in it for the agent.

For one thing, most agents will know, in the case of most magazines, what is the top price that can be had

for a given type of work; this is something you will have a very hard time finding out except through an agent.

Almost all agents, good and bad, have a few valid editorial connections somewhere, so that your chances of getting read, through an agent, are higher than through mail submission direct. Even if you are a genius there is little chance that the big, snobbish agents will handle you when you start to write. It is their best bet to wait until some smaller agent has built you up, and then steal you.

As you sell more and more of your work you will run against the involved matters incident to copyright and author's right releases. It would take pages to tell you what rights you have in written work and how they are to be protected. An agent is invaluable in this respect. He acts much in the capacity that does a legal counsel.

Until you do get an agent—if you decide to—you ought to try to hold on to all of the rights you possibly can to everything you sell; there is no telling when some foreign magazine may want to reprint it or translate it; and unsolicited motion picture sales strike like lightning here and there without any rhyme or reason. You can protect all rights in what you write only by having your material copyrighted in your name when it is published, and at the same time getting a written release of "all except first American serial rights" from the editor. The word *serial*, in this connection, has a

special meaning—it does not apply only to serialized stories.

But few magazines will copyright your story in your name. This they can do, very easily, if they wish, by running a copyright notice in your name at the end of the story. The Authors' League of America is now striving desperately to get magazines to do this; but, of course, they fight an uphill battle. Publishers are no more honest than other business men. They will steal your rights if they can.

If you cannot get your story run with a copyright notice in your name, the next best thing is to get a release of "all except first American serial rights," from the editor. If he will not release all except first American serial rights, then get him to release everything that he will; English rights, radio rights, motion picture rights, Second American serial rights, etc., etc. From almost any editor you can get a release of some rights. These right releases should be kept on file in case anything comes up later. They do not absolutely protect you; but they are *prima facie* evidence of your possession of certain rights, though even this can and has successfully been questioned in the civil courts in specific cases. If I were here to go into all of the functions of a good agent, I would need one hundred thousand words to scratch the surface of all these legal and technical matters. But do not be frightened—the chances are you can find an agent to take you on. It took me several years to find out things for myself, so now that I have

a good agent I know what he is talking about when he writes to me.

The five Big Shot agents do not advertise at all. Obviously I cannot list their names here; you will have to find out for yourself somehow.* Some good agents advertise. Some of them even charge reading fees for manuscripts submitted. If I were an agent I would charge the hell out of new authors for reading their early experiments in cash and carry prose.

You cannot, in any way of which I handily know, protect your short story by copyright, previous to sending it to an editor; and if you did, and you sent it to one of the editors who do not release all rights, he would probably reject it for that reason if for no other. Of course you have a "common law" property right in your story the moment you yank it out of your typewriter; it cannot, theoretically, be stolen from you any more than can your typewriter. Actually, there is almost no likelihood of its being stolen. Not that there is more honesty lying around loose in editorial offices than in other typically American establishments; but if one editorial office were to steal your idea, or your variations, or your bits of business, why might not another? And if the practice were indulged in it might be carried to

* Since TRIAL & ERROR was first published, Mr. Woodford has received thousands of requests for the names and addresses of the agents who do not advertise. In order to obviate transmission of mail, the publishers will furnish this information upon receipt of a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

the point where some month a lot of magazines would come out with the same story in each.

It is ham authors, as a matter of fact, who attempt to do most of the stealing nowadays. They see a motion picture, novel, play or short story, which is something like one they submitted at one time or another to the publisher or producer in question. They go to a contingent fee lawyer and state the facts. The lawyer says:

"Well, you haven't got a chance of succeeding in a civil suit for plagiarism, but it will cost them plenty to keep you from succeeding and win their case. We'll file suit, accept a settlement, withdraw the suit and split the takings."

It is too bad that some way cannot be devised to put authors in jail for such tactics. Stealing, in America, should always be done along recognized, ethical lines, otherwise it confuses everybody.

In New York State there is at present some agitation in not permitting such suits unless the author puts up a bond to cover all of the costs if the case goes against him. This is an excellent idea, but will probably come to nothing. There are more cheap, contingent fee lawyers than good ones, and they have great political influence, as is shown by the defeat of the Authors' League Bill to establish copyright, like common law rights, in an author's work the moment it is written. The bill was bitterly fought and defeated, though the Authors' League will again present it. A great many fair producers and publishers, who do not want more than

they are entitled to from an author, favor the bill and are helping it.

I suppose you are wondering about this Author's League of America to which I have referred.

I guess it is all right to dilate upon it for a moment, since it has nothing to sell, and is the finest thing of its kind of which I know.

It is an organization for fostering and if possible achieving legislation helpful to authors; for furnishing market information, both of a general and of a specific, confidential sort; for helping authors when they get into temporary financial difficulties. There is no profit to anybody in the organization; most of its officials give their time free of charge. The few paid executives get remarkably small salaries, considering the extraordinarily fine and hard work they do. It has always been a wonder to me how anything as efficient and clean and honest can survive at all in America.

Miss Sillcox, the secretary of the League, has probably done more to increase the security of writers facing the natural desire to exploit them on the part of most publishers and producers than any other one person in America.

Before the Authors' League of America took hold of the situation, writers were shamefully exploited in every direction, far more so than any others save, perhaps, inventors, who create things out of which Babbitt can make a profit. Now, after its years of operation all

authors reap the benefits whether they are members or not.

Non-membership in the Authors' League in no way hampers the beginning writer, or even the established writer. A few established writers who want to be "different" as college boys become different by wearing yellow skull caps, do not belong to the League and it does not interfere with their ability to make fame or money. The writing tyro, though he is usually unaware of it, profits by many of the renovated publishing practices the League has established.

chapter--

XVI

EDITORS

"Blockheads with reason wicked wits abhor,
But fool with fool is barb'rous civil war.
Embrace, embrace, my sons! be foes no more!"

POPE

YES, LET US DEVOTE A WHOLE CHAPTER to them, in spite of having manhandled them throughout. Every writer longs to spew out something about editors. Few ever have the chance; still fewer would dare take advantage of the chance if they had it.

Of course, a lot of this feeling that writers have against editors flows out of sheer pique, and frustration, and feelings of inferiority; not to say accompanying paradoxical delusions of grandeur on the part of the author; and the author never lived who failed to have delusions of grandeur. A lot of my feeling about editors comes out of such stuff, I admit it; but some of it is soundly based, as many an editor I have talked to will admit.

Taking them by and large, editors are pretty good

sports. I have been abusing them for years, and they haven't discriminated against me because of that; far from it, they have been darn nice about it—mostly they have grinned and borne it and often admitted that I was right when I wasn't right at all and they knew it. Maybe this was because they considered me a damned spaniel yapping at the heels of a mental giant; but I don't think it was that. I think it was just plain good sportsmanship. For they are fine fellows, these editors. No spoofing. I mean it. But that is the trouble. They are *just* fine fellows. There is nothing about them to indicate any exceptional ability or any unusual discernment.

The average author, given charge of a magazine for the first time, as its editor, usually runs it into a terrible hole; whereupon the business manager and the advertising manager and the publisher all jump upon him with savage cries. Then he either haughtily quits his job and notifies everyone that he is after all an artist, not a business man, or else he sticks on, if he needs the money, and begins to do all of the annoying things that editors he used to deal with used to do to him. He does them because there is nothing else to do if he wants to hold his job.

I promised to tell you about the advisability of making a pilgrimage to New York, or, if you live in New York, to editorial offices, to "contact" editors, as the Babbitts say.

You will, if you do it, and can afford to do it, return

to Gubyville, Missouri, a badly disillusioned and shocked and confounded man. For editors are nothing like what you imagine, from what you have been formally told in books for writers that say the right sort of thing.

For instance, one time when I was in New York I went to see the editor of one of the quality magazines. I had sold the magazine some articles and hoped to sell them more.

I was ushered into the editor's office without difficulty; he was charming and treated me as though I were actually an equal. (An exceptional concession for an editor to make any author.) We discussed his needs and went at some length into intellectual matters, in the usual Eastern way, as though intellectual matters were something very significant. I saw that the editor was getting more and more bored. I was bored to the point of wishing to jump out of the window.

Suddenly his eyes lit up. He picked up a curiously carved box and handed it to me. I opened it, and there were some delicious cigarettes within. When I opened the lid, the music box business in the bottom of the fool thing started to play. I was startled. He laughed uproariously. The box was imported; the cigarettes were imported. Like an excited child's his whole manner became different. We discussed the box, the cigarettes, and the effect of the sudden issuance of music from the box upon various persons of whom he told me for at least half an hour. All boredom vanished from his mind. He was happy and excited. When I went out he was

still fingering the box and setting it to trap the next unwary victim.

Once, in a Chicago restaurant I saw Mr. Lansinger, then publisher of *College Humor Magazine,* and Mr. H. N. Swanson, the editor. They did not see me because I was behind them. They seemed to be in heavy cabal, so I did not bother them; but I couldn't help hearing what they were saying.

"Swanie," who is now a big shot Hollywood agent, was excitedly telling Mr. Lansinger that he had in some way secured an All American football article of great importance, apparently, for publication in his magazine, before some similar article could appear in another magazine. Swanie discussed other editorial matters. His boss, obviously bored, retired behind monosyllabic responses. Finally Swanie talked himself out. The publisher then asked, with new animation and attention, about the cover for the month then being made up.

Swanie sulkily discussed the cover and tried to switch back to contents; but Mr. Lansinger talked cover matters throughout the rest of their luncheon.

There is hardly a publisher in the magazine business who does not attach an importance to covers that would amaze you.

The average magazine publisher, if he were forced to accept one of two combinations, good covers and bum writers; or bum cover artists and good writers would without hesitation take the poor writers along with the good artist.

There are certain writers who can greatly help their own chances for muscling into the free lance racket by seeking out editors. You'll writhe when I tell you what type. The "good mixer" type. . . . The obviously extrovert type. There are, among editors, a few exceptions; but on the whole the rule is good. If you mix well with other people, you will mix in the same way with editors.

Remember that to an editor, an author, *as an author,* is a pain in the neck; just as, to an author, an editor, *as an editor,* is a pain in the perhaps more extremely localized portions of one's anatomy, as Mr. Mencken might put it.

If, when you go to New York to meet editors, you act as you think an author ought to act in meeting an editor, you will bore and infuriate the editor, and you will be painfully bored yourself, and nothing will be accomplished. If you breeze in and say:

"So you are the chap who buys my junk," or something to that effect, you will get off to a splendid start, and the chances are that everything will go pretty well. Editors have a definite "front" or "act" that they put on for authors who visit them obviously expecting them to act like editors; just as authors put on an act sometimes when they think editors expect them to act like authors. The result of this is mutually painful and entirely unhelpful in the matter of future sales relations.

Don't forget, both you and the editor are putting on an unceasing act for the public, and between you

there should be the same relation that exists between a magician and his assistant, off stage. If you try to fool each other with these cheap magic tricks with which the public is fooled the situation becomes simply impossible.

Male editors, with but few exceptions—and most of the exceptions are in the quality group where artificiality reigns supreme on the part of both author and editor—are like males of any other sort. Most of them are not better educated or more intelligent than the average real estate salesman; though they usually employ longer words to say the same things. Remember that "knowledge" is the material stored, and "intelligence" is the ability to use it. You will, with the average editor, find more material stored; so far as the ability to use it is concerned, the average shrewd real estate salesman can run circles around them. The same is true of authors. Many authors, though they think they turn to writing only to make money or fame, turn to it because of a peculiar sense of inferiority which prompts them to "express" themselves. In this type of author the material stored is often pathetic, including the ability to quote entire pages of Rolland and give word for word the whole opening chapter of Mr. Hemingway's "Farewell to Arms." In this sort of person the material stored so outweighs the ability to use it that the unfortunate possessor of such an unbalance is all but helpless. This type of author editors particularly loathe; and few editors ever are like that. It takes *some* practical intelli-

gence to run any kind of magazine; it takes almost no intelligence at all to write like Proust and Huysmans; it takes a form of insanity called, sometimes, "genius." (And I dote on both Proust and Huysmans.) But if you are a genius, for goodness' sake conceal it, if possible, from editors, when you visit them—nothing annoys them more than genius, for most of them feel that it is the overdevelopment of one thing to the almost complete exclusion of everything else.

Being like other males, the average editor's first and foremost interest in life is in females. If you are a female and pretty, barn-storm New York editorial offices by all means; especially if you are the sort of girl who realizes that a trifle of ultimate agreeability—providing you don't get caught at it either socially or biologically—will do no harm.

If you are the "teaser" type you'll have to be a very fine writer indeed to go back home and still sell the editors you have encouraged and then tricked. If you are really clever and have some valid reluctance to ultimate agreeability you can, of course, be charming and nothing else and get away with it. Editors are not more exacting than chain store executives; but they are more grateful than chain store executives.

Of course I realize that I here speak upon dangerous ground; we Americans are so childishly pettish about such matters that it is impossible to be perfectly frank and realistic and helpful about such things in print. However, I have outlined the editor and lady author

situation as clearly as my publisher is likely to let me—and I have been in the fiction racket long enough not only to observe closely, but to check my observations and recheck them with numerous writers and editors.

If you are a woman with no sex appeal—particularly if you are a woman with no sex appeal who *thinks* she has sex appeal—the dithering sort all men loathe—for no reason ever go near New York; and, if you live there, never let an editor see you if you can help it—that is, a male editor; it is unwise to let even female editors see you—male editors will ask them what sort you are, and the female editors will tell them, the cats—! So long as you mail in your stuff, or send it in by an agent, there will be a mildly pleasant feeling of uncertainty and expectancy toward you. Male editors will have no direct notion that someday you will come in and be delightfully chummy, but they will be half unconsciously thinking that they are dealing with a pretty lady from afar, which pleasantly oils them in the abstract, even though they never give any direct thought to the matter. Remember, New York is full of pretty women—and that city is less provincial than any other in the United States. Ladies there, of any intelligence or beauty, do not quibble about the juvenile fears entertained by women in other parts of the country; hence, New York editors are a pretty blasé and sophisticated lot in this direction. Nothing annoys them more than to have some not very pretty female from

Nebraska blow in filled with the notion that editors will instantly want her carcass.

There are certain types of women who ingratiate themselves with other women. If you are that sort it will help you to call upon lady editors. If you are not that type, it will hurt you greatly. If you are the kind that talks pleasantly, and smiles with the facial muscles, while thinking, "I'll bet this New York female is no better than she should be; and what *awful* clothes she wears," you had better stay as far away from lady editors as you can possibly get. You won't be able to dissemble before them sufficiently. All Eastern women can spot your type instantly. After your visit they will not be conscious of discriminating against you because the thought of you makes them ill, but nevertheless you will have set up a subconscious bias against you in their minds which will react on your possibilities for acceptance when you submit further material. For the male author, procedure is simpler, if he does not wear spats or carry a cane. If you are a good mixer you'll probably get along easily. Often, in fact, the editor will dig you up a girl; show her a four dimensional time. Throw a final party in which you all but drown the editors you have met in the best liquor you can afford. Shake hands all around while everybody is comfortably ignited, and go off in a haze of glory to your train before you get gummy and start telling people your life story. Your sales will *double* when you get back to Sioux City, Iowa; unless you have confided to edi-

tors that you write because of some inner categorical imperative bearing upon a great mission. The editors you inveigled to your party will tell a lot of other editors that you are a prince, and things will pick up for you wonderfully.

If you can afford to take editors out to luncheon and dinner, don't haul them off to an expensive place of the sort New Yorkers shun; go where they'll feel comfortable in their cheap clothes. Find out where they like to go, even if it takes considerable teasing to get this information (if you have no agent), and then take them there even if it is very cheap and shockingly dirty. Don't praise the place—the editor may like it because it's lousy and know you for a poseur.

On this editor contact business an agent is invaluable. I hope you don't mind my not writing a stiff treatise for you, and, instead, talking to you as though we were in a Pullman smoker. As a racketeer in a better racket might put it, I'm "leveling" to you; what I'm telling you contains no kidding; it's straight. Other writers will, and do, bear me out in this. I have discussed all of the matters of which I write with them thoroughly, over a period of years, to be sure that I am not writing from any narrow bias of my own—except in the specific instances where I have been careful to inform you that I speak out of accord with my fellows.

But actually, it is my opinion—though this is controversial—that no editor contact other than those had

through agents and by mail is necessary. If this were not so, I would not be able to make a living as a writer, for I am the worst possible sort of mixer.

It would be hard to find anyone less capable of being a prince of a chap, in the conception of most editors and other males, than am I. But I sell. And so can you if you're no mixer either. So can you, if you are bound and determined to do it. When I started to write I was employed from nine until five as a petty official in a bank. A petty officer in a bank is one that gets the same salary as the tellers, but is entitled to a key to the officers' private lavatory. I was also entitled to a brass plate with my name on it; a brass spittoon a foot and a half high that couldn't be kicked over, a mahogany veneer desk with an insured glass top an inch thick, and a direct, brass, "good morning," from the president of the bank. You may believe me or not, but after I sold that first story I got up at four o'clock week day mornings, winter and summer, for several years, and wrote between about four-thirty and eight each morning—studying literature frantically half the night. (A very bad mistake, this latter, I later found.)

chapter--

XVII

BOOK PUBLISHERS

"I do not think publishing at all creditable either to men or women, and (though you will not believe me) very often feel ashamed of it myself."

BYRON (LETTER TO LADY CAROLINE LAMB)

THERE ARE TWO MAIN DIVISIONS OF book publishers; those who publish on a royalty basis, paying a commission to the author on each book sold, and those who publish limited editions of books, paying the author a flat cash price, in advance, for the manuscript, much as a magazine editor, on a reliable magazine, pays cash in advance for a short story.

There are certain advantages inherent in each sort of publisher.

If you have written a book that you feel has no motion picture possibilities; that you are sure will not be understood by the average reader, it would, in all likelihood, have far greater chances for profitable sale

through a limited edition publisher. Such a publisher, in addition to paying you cash in advance for the book, will publish it in beautiful format, and sell it to select readers at a price sufficiently high to enable the author and the publisher to make as much out of the sale of fifteen hundred copies of such a book as a royalty publisher, and the author, would make out of a sale of five thousand copies of an openly published book.

Many limited edition publishers go in for erotica; but not all of them. In the past they went in more frequently for erotica than now. It would be almost impossible, nowadays, to write a book so erotic that some open edition publisher would not dare take a chance on it. See, in this connection, Claude Kendall and Company's splendid open edition of Octave Mirbeau's "Torture Garden." I don't see how it would be possible to write a more "dangerous" book (from the standpoint of the censor) yet it was published openly and no stir among the censors resulted.

By far the largest number of publishers are royalty publishers, and most of them will pay advance royalties upon the acceptance of a novel, if plagued to do so by an agent who knows his business.

There is a type of publisher that charges the author for publishing his work; or asks the author to pay part of the costs. This business is legitimate; but if you ever have anything to do with a publisher of that sort it will be the same as though you had married a full blooded Indian in Arizona.

With a limited edition publisher it is not necessary to have a contract. A simple agreement covering major matters is sufficient. With royalty publishers the matter is quite different. Contracts with them are a problem into which investigation here would lead us through at least an hundred thousand pages with major matters still untouched. In the matter of such contracts you would do well to employ an agent and give him a commission if for no other reason than to get his advice upon the contract. (Once you *have* a contract offered you, any agent will gladly serve!) There is a feeling, even among well established writers, that a substantial publishing firm can be trusted as to contracts; the result is that many times yearly terrible complications arise after the fact of an author having signed a form contract without reading it.

The Authors' League of America has a specimen perfect contract which is used by every honest publisher in New York, and the League (address, 9 E. 38th St., N. Y.) will mail you one of these specimen contracts for a small sum.

Not so long ago an old and established Boston publisher went into bankruptcy. Because its form contract with authors always called for copyright in the name of the publishing house, instead of in the name of the author, the copyrights to all it's books were listed among the assets, and the whole group of copyrights sold to a man for a song; whereupon the purchaser resold the copyrights at a huge profit to the authors

of the books thus involved, and to others when the authors could not afford his price. No reputable publisher will ask you to permit him to copyright your work in his name.

Another very dangerous contract clause is the one usually headed, "Sharing of Special Rights." It goes something like this:

"No payment shall be made by the publisher for permission gratuitously given to publish extracts from said work to benefit the sale thereof; but all compensation received either by author or publisher for the publication of extracts therefrom, or for serial use after publication in book form, or for translations, or for abridgments, shall be equally divided between the parties hereto. All compensation received by either author or publisher for the dramatic or motion picture rights, or for the first serial rights prior to book publication, shall be divided in the proportion of fifty percent to the author and fifty percent to the publisher."

You will find a paragraph like that in most book publishing contracts. Sign the contract only after the paragraph has been completely removed, or vastly abridged. To sign a publishing contract with that paragraph in it is to do what you would be doing if in buying a motor car, to be used as a taxicab, you agreed to give the one from whom you bought the car half of everything you made in taxi service, and half what you should receive in the event that after a time you resold the car.

A fair royalty stipulation is ten percent of the catalogue retail price of the book on the first twenty-five hundred copies sold; twelve and one half percent on the next two thousand copies sold and fifteen percent on all subsequent copies. (That is a fair royalty stipulation on a first novel, unless you have a Big Name built up through contributions to high toned slick paper magazines full of magnificent advertisements for soup and yeast.)

Some caution should be observed on the "Option on Future Books" clause in most contracts. It is fair to give the publisher an option on two more books; anything beyond that is excessive.

From a limited edition publisher you should get a valid agreement releasing motion picture rights (there is always the possibility of m. p. sales in any work) and foreign translation rights; also either an agreement that no more copies of the book will ever be printed at any price or for any reason, or the stipulation that if more copies are printed a regular contract be first executed covering them.

No good limited edition publisher ever prints more than the first edition. This gives the limited edition publisher's books a first edition value not implicit in most methods of publishing. Sometimes books published in limited editions sell for two or three times their original retail prices within a few years after they have been published. Out of this will accrue no additional profit for you, unless you have bought in, at wholesale prices,

sufficient quantities of the book to do a bit of trading in this market yourself, independent of what your publisher is doing. This is perfectly ethical and is usually done. Many writers publish one sort of books in open editions, and another sort in limited editions; other authors publish not only limited edition books through such publishers, but hold as many as three or four contracts with different open edition publishers for various types of books—detective and mystery books to one; sex novels to another, non-fiction books through still another publisher, and so on.

Book publishers, as a rule, are far more pleasant to deal with than magazine publishers. Book publishers are actually in the publishing business; magazine publishers are really in the advertising business. However, it is not wiser to trust book publishers than it is to trust bankers—and as an ex-banker and one who has scuttled quite largely around this country of ours I give you my solemn word of honor that I have never seen any one class of men more corrupt, conscienceless and thieving than bankers.

I am strongly tempted here to close this chapter. But I vowed when I started this book to be honest throughout; and it is only at this point that I have been tempted almost overwhelmingly to withhold part of the facts from you; not because I am afraid that I may be put on the spot, after a manner of speaking, by publishers for what I shall tell you, but because I am afraid that I may discourage you here a trifle more than the facts warrant.

I am not afraid of my own publishers; they publish me in spite of *me* and because they think they can make some money out of my work if they are patient and long suffering enough. I don't back slap around New York, so I can be independent in such matters.

The plain truth of the matter is that almost every truly worthy author in America had the most awful time with publishers while working his way toward fame. Publishers present a wall of stupid resistance toward individuality in authorship that is almost heartbreaking. You should hear the tales of many a famous author today concerning the stupidity and negligence he met when first he approached book publishers. Practically every novelist of any significance in America today clawed his way to eminence despite every disadvantage and handicap that publishers could throw in his way. This is no controversial matter. Partly this has been due to the fact that significant authors very often have a lack of appreciation of the importance of the box office to a publisher which makes relations between good authors and publishers difficult in a country where venality is the rule in all walks of life. Don't look to publishers for help and encouragement; whatever you make of yourself, you will do unaided. When you have arrived they will angle for you to come to New York and be bored stiff at literary teas to which the proper publicity people have been invited; they will fawn all over you disgustingly—though they will never get over the habit of trying to cop half your movie sales

money. But until you do arrive they are your worst enemies. In fact, in order to even start arriving you may have to eat the most sickening of humble pie for awhile in the way of contracts forced upon you—or no sale—that are downright swindles. When, as and if you do arrive you can handily get back at them. And if you think authors who have arrived don't do it you're all wrong. They make life miserable for them, and properly so.

But it is only if you show signs of being vastly different in some way from the ruck of writers that you will feel this publisher oppression in all quarters. If you write badly, but badly in a facile, salable way, you'll never have any troubles with publishers, so cheer up, and try not to be too individualistic if you can help it; the price paid by an author for individualism in the American publishing business is enough to break the heart of any beginning writer not equipped with extraordinary determination and guts.

It is only fair to say that there are a few notable exceptions to this rule.

However, when a new novelist deals with an old publisher, he is a sucker if he fails to have an agent looking over his shoulder.

When a publisher accepts a book to publish it, he does so, if he is honest, because he hopes to make money out of publishing the book.

If he is the other kind of publisher, he will be the kind who wants half your movie rights.

chapter--

XVIII

PLAUSIBILITY

"Who, for instance, could ever believe in the existence of the Aethiopians, who had not first seen them?"

PLINY

USUALLY ONE EXPOSED TO INSTRUCTION upon writing hears endless material concerning "convincingness."

There is indeed a need to convince every sort of reader of something; but the word "plausibility" suits better in this connection.

I wish that I could tell you of some dope which, used regularly, would give your work an air of plausibility.

When I speak of plausibility I mean even in the most outrageously silly stories; even in confession stories, and in theme stories where the theme is, "Life is earnest, life is real and death is not the goal."

In the artistic story, whatever that is, there must be more than plausibility; there must be absolute convincingness; even in such romance as Mr. Cabell writes,

where the characters leave all known lands and disport in Poictesme.

Of course it is obvious to you at once how best to arrive at a degree of plausibility; by sticking to subjects about which you know something. And then when you grow tired of writing upon subjects about which you know something, you will try to borrow your plausibility from other books and stories.

From *Saturday Evening Post* stories, for instance, you will try to borrow Mr. Hergesheimer's interior decorations. From novels you will try to lift material concerning the South Seas. And at once you will get into trouble.

If you have no direct access to Hergesheimer brand tallboys and teacups, you can get them from books; but not from books of fiction—from books on tallboys and teacups; and even then you will never be able to make the thing any too plausible. The South Seas you can fake pretty well from books of non-fiction about the South Seas . . . even then you will need considerable practice and ingeniousness.

By far the best thing to do is to stick to what you already know. If you really begin to sell, and work hard, and are determined to get somewhere with your work, either commercially or otherwise, you will early form the habit of diligent inquiry in every quarter possible.

When you have the chance, ask plumbers how joints are wiped; get them to show you. When new soles are

put on your winter-before-last shoes, don't sit around reading the Police Gazette, while you sit shoeless waiting for a hurry-up job on your only pair of shoes. Watch the shoemaker. If you can at all understand what he says, ask him why, in newsreels, it rains most of the time in sunny Italy.

There is some misunderstanding abroad in the land as to just why authors, that is, with the exception of trade magazine and house organ hacks, are in demand socially. Husbands think that it is because they go around misunderstanding misunderstood wives. But this is only partly true. Authors, who are really intent upon making money or making fame, flatter the living hell out of most people by asking them endless questions and *actually listening to the answers.*

Babbitts go around asking each other questions, both the male and the female Babbitt, and then listening at all only with the hope that the reply be short so that talk about oneself may be indulged in with as little delay as possible.

Many times I have been in groups containing an author or two; and many times I have noted how intensely flattered those who do not write are when the author, despite all encouragement to talk about himself, snaggles somebody into telling him all the innermost secrets of his employment or life interest or hobby; listening, the while, with a genuine interest and attention that is seldom come upon socially in America.

Later that author will be in a position exactly to state, in some story of his, just how a silk jobber, whose son is

in love with the female lead of the story, operates when he jobs a lot of silk. And because the author has attended to this slight bit of detail in the story accurately, all of the viscous inaccuracy about love will pass unnoticed and business men, all of whom know something about the dark arts of jobbery, will call it a convincing story. They will say that the author has great talent, because he has ten words in the story about silk jobbery that are accurate. That, my friend, is the second biggest secret of the commercial fiction racketeer. You remember I told you the first one was his trick of causing stories to divide up into percentages of classified wordage far different from those customarily shown in amateur's stories.

Persistence in seeing photographic details, old plot situations, hackneyed human emotions in some original, perverse, piquant, or even vicious way of one's own will cause those old things to seem new, and again arresting, and interesting.

Which is why I have insisted throughout that the writer who will succeed either has a knack, or a flair of some sort, which is all his own; just as Norman Rockwell, among artists, has a knack, or a flair all his own—or develops such a facility—or fails, as an artist, or as a writer.

One of the most perfect examples that I can point out to you of the way synthetically to obtain plausibility of the sort that will please Christians lies in the *Saturday Evening Post* art of Mr. Norman Rockwell.

The manner in which he arrives at unusual plausi-

bility in his art is precisely the manner which may be employed by all of you in writing commercial fiction.

Mr. Rockwell could have been, indisputably, one of the great artists of our age; and he is, indisputably, in the highest top flights of the large commercial artists of our day.

Nobody knows better than he the difference between objective and subjective plausibility.

When both objective and subjective plausibility meet in perfect synthesis you have something that is just possibly immortal and which perhaps—if you are an artist—you can sell for as much as four dollars somewhere, because the artistic synthesis of objective and subjective convincingness is a thing that gives demos a terrible headache at sight.

But when you have something which contains good objective plausibility, without any harrying subjective nuances mixed up in the matter, you have something that you can sell for real money, usually. If, in addition, you can cause convincing objective (surface) plausibility, and at the same time do it in an original, startling and impressive manner, painting your prose colors in with one tenth of one percent the ability with which Norman Rockwell paints in his colors, you will soon be a major victim for the tax ghouls to gnaw upon.

If you have never seen a Norman Rockwell illustration on the cover of a copy of the *Saturday Evening Post* you haven't lived.

There is something about them that "gets" you, and

it is not the same something that "gets" you in art museums; but it is just as startling in its own way.

It is, in short, a combination of superb painting, clever interpretation and *photographic detail.*

The odd part about it is that if you saw his models, and his composition, *in life,* it would probably have no effect upon you.

Then why does a scene which in life would startle nobody, when depicted by Norman Rockwell on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* arrest all sorts of people except artists?

You could, for instance, walk around the block at this point and see fifty excellent possibilities for *Saturday Evening Post* covers; yet none of these, as you glimpsed them, would arrest you in their living breathing realities. Yet every one of them, even the simplest of them all, would arrest you if you saw them painted by Norman Rockwell on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post.*

If you saw a photograph of any one of them on the cover of the *Post,* the chances are that it would affect you little. Take, for instance, a man you might see on any walk around the block, bending over, podex exposed, head buried in the hood of his car, tinkering with the car's innards. What is there impressive about that? You've seen it an hundred times at least; you give it, on the street, only cursory attention.

Photograph the man bending over fixing his car and put it on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post.* What

have you now? Still nothing—though you will think it must be something if you see it on the *Post*.

But go get the man, the car, have them pose for Norman Rockwell, let him paint them for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* and what have you now? Why is it that it becomes at last impressive? Startlingly so . . . makes you stop and buy the *Post* even as you perhaps innerly faint from the thought of fifty advertisements for motor oil, all of which claim individually that any other oil will ruin a motor car.

You have a picture of a man bending over with his podex showing, monkeying with the innards of his car; but now, magically enough, it means something; it is the same, yet it is different entirely.

If I may criticise Norman Rockwell's art—and I haven't the faintest right to criticise art, any more than the average art critic has—I should say that his success lies first in capturing minute detail, and secondly in accentuating certain among the items of that detail. By that I mean that although there are probably a lot of artists of Norman Rockwell's type in the United States who could copy models just as photographically as he does, none of them—because they are not Norman Rockwell—would *accentuate* certain of those items of photographic detail.

The camera would not accentuate any of those items; it would merely report them.

So that it is not the detail itself, but the accentuation of certain of the catalogued items which does the trick.

How does this subtly effective accentuation of certain among the details come about?

It comes about first, of course, because Norman Rockwell is no other artist than Norman Rockwell. Which is to say, being a man of exceptional subtleties in some directions himself, with an exceptional humor, and an exceptional flair for keen observation, he *just naturally*, through the accentuation of these details, brings from his mind to the mind of the person looking at the picture, a lively humor and intelligence through the medium of artistic transference.

To get at the thing still more deeply, let us suppose that the man fixing his motor car is *photographed* by Norman Rockwell, and thence after being photographed by Rockwell himself, transferred as a photograph to the cover of the *Post*.

Still we have nothing.

Because a photograph is a static, immobile thing, which can convey only (without retouching) *what you and I have seen* hundreds of times before.

But no matter how many times we have seen men leaning over fixing motor cars with their rumps elevated and their heads buried we have never before seen this sight *through the eyes of Norman Rockwell.*

With a photograph we still do not see it through his eyes; but with the painting before us we somehow enter into his mind for a moment through the medium of his painter's skill in accentuating certain minute matters

which *he himself* probably accentuates *wholly subconsciously.*

To apply all this to written fiction, we find that in approaching a given story, a given set of characters, and a given grouping of emotional situations, we will in all probability be looking at a set of facts, persons and emotional striations all of which have been looked at many times before in various ways by those who will read the story when it is finished.

Then our problem becomes first to gather our detail together and catalogue it to be sure that we have all the facts at hand; the little facts which tend toward establishing first a realistic picture.

With these facts properly gathered together we have, in essence, what amounts to a prose photograph.

Now we are thrown back completely and entirely upon our knack, or our flair, as a writer; upon the quality of our minds. If we are unique in some way, if we see "same things" from an individual viewpoint, with degrees of coloration and interpretation that are extraordinary in some respect, then we can take old plots, old facts, old catalogues of detail and categories of emotion, and with all this old junk *still* write something arresting.

That is, we can, if there is really anything unique, or interesting, or unusually observant and piquant in the qualities of our minds; particularly our subconscious minds.

chapter--

XIX

VOCABULARY

"What are you able to build with your blocks?
Castles and palaces, temples and docks.
Rain may keep raining, and others go roam,
But I can be happy and building at home."

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

NOTHING COULD BE MORE FOOLISH THAN to waste time learning a new word each day if you are going to write commercially.

A Thesaurus is indispensable. It should be used in this manner: whenever you catch yourself using a "long" word, one that would offend and affright the wife of a gas meter reader—while she sits at home reading of multimillionaires while her husband is out glancing at meters without seeing them and writing down anything in his reports—truncate the word somehow.

If you have been to college, you already know at least fifty thousand words too many for the equipment of a free lance writer in the commercial fiction racket.

If you have been to high school, you will know at

least ten thousand words too many. If you have finished eighth grade at grammar school, you will still know far too many words for use in this racket.

Dickens, it is said, had a total vocabulary of twenty-five hundred words. I believe whoever said that was a liar; but even if it is true, Dickens used far too many words.

One of your first jobs, as you write for money, will be to get rid of your vocabulary. Give every care and attention to using words that are short; for the first few years spend a lot of time, deliberately, looking up words in your Thesaurus which mean nearly the same as words you habitually use, but which are "easier." Editors will love you for it; quantity readers will dote on you.

When I had my first book published, under the title "Evangelical Cockroach," I was as silly about it as authors of first books always are. I stopped in at a number of book stores around the country, where the book was on sale, to find out how it was going.

My first shock came from one of the then shrewdest book store buyers in the United States: Mr. Solle, at Kroch's book store in Chicago.

"It's a foul book," Mr. Solle told me, in his inimitable way; "almost foul enough to sell . . . but you've greatly handicapped it with your title."

I was very polite. I wanted him to load up on the book—he had, by the way, sense enough not to overload.

"But, Mr. Solle, surely the sort of person who might like the book wouldn't be offended by the combination of words: 'Evangelical,' and 'Cockroach.' "

I almost fainted in the aisle when he explained:

"Hell no—nobody will be particularly offended by it —but they won't know what the word 'Evangelical' means."

"But—!" I sputtered, not sure whether he was joking or being sarcastic (and Mr. Solle could be sarcastic).

He was quite serious; and he was thoroughly correct. Nobody was offended by the title, as I had hoped. They even sold the book—write them if you don't believe me—at the Methodist Book Store, in Richmond, Virginia. But everywhere I heard the same story:

"The average reader won't know what the word 'Evangelical' means. He'll think it's some sort of treatise on insects."

I decided, with the customary insouciance of authors that everybody but I was crazy. But cautious as usual, I investigated.

I asked a bootblack:

"What does 'Evangelical' mean?"

He thought carefully:

"I don't know, mister."

"What church do you go to?"

"The Baptist church."

"How far did you go in school?"

"First year high school."

I kept that up in despair for several weeks. Railway

conductors, elevator operators; clerks in stores of every sort; detectives, prostitutes, people of every kind and description. Not more than about forty percent of those I questioned had any idea at all what the word "Evangelical" meant. Of these forty percent about half thought it meant a particular religious denomination. Among the other half only a few could give a good definition of the word "Evangelical." I found only two persons who could give a perfect definition of the word, though I asked a number of book store attendants and a whole group of people in a publisher's office.

How do *you* define the word?

. . . And there you are!

Be careful.

Many writers of my acquaintance try to make their vocabularies never exceed those on tap in newspapers. This is a fairly good plan; but it all depends upon the newspapers. One of the things that put the *New York World* out of business was the staff's vocabulary. A perfect vocabulary could be taken from the *New York Daily Mirror*, for universal use by American commercial writers.

My abominable vocabulary is part of my style.

I wish to heaven I could get rid of it. I once had the mad notion to learn the perfect word to fit every nuance of expression conceived, with the result that now I have to spend a lot of time, in most work, finding some simpler word than the one I would habitually

use. I haven't done so in this book, naturally, since in it I for once let go of all artificiality in every direction.

People of intelligence make it a practice always to look up in a dictionary any new word they come across and instantly add it to their vocabularies. This is all very fine; but not in the free lance fiction racket—it is murder—the sort of thing for which you'll be taken for a ride by editor and reader.

The main point is not to worry about your vocabulary at all as you come to the free lance fiction racket. If you can speak sufficiently to make yourself understood in your daily life contacts, you have already all the vocabulary you need for free lance commercial writing. Don't ever increase it.

If you have already an exceptional vocabulary, write without any attention to the words you use; but go over your script afterward and in every instance possible erase a "hard" word and for it substitute an "easy" one. After a time you will get out of the habit of using "hard" words. . . . What? This horrifies you? Well, a racket's a racket, isn't it!

And about this cliché business. If you don't know what a cliché is, don't mind what I say here at all; the matter is of no importance to you as a commercial writer. If you do know what a cliché is, take my word for it that any popular magazine editor or book publisher would ten thousand times rather have you fill your work from end to end with the most awful clichés in the English language than to have you strive for

fresh phrases that will startle and annoy the cash and carry customers of circulating libraries and popular magazines.

Yes, I know; it will ruin your style; ruin your chances ever of becoming a good writer if you permit yourself to form the cliché habit. Well? What's to be done about it? After all, it is far easier to use the cliché than not; it makes writing go much swifter. . . . And if you don't want to harm your chances for becoming a significant writer why do you turn to the *commercial* writing racket at all? How is it that if you really yearn to be a worthwhile writer; if you really understand what that means, that you even read a book on how to write? If you don't know any better than to do that, it won't hurt you, or your chances for immortality a bit to go ahead and cliché along.

I am sure, reader, that if I could look at you, and talk to you for an hour or so, I would be able definitely to tell you whether or not you are going to succeed in muscling into the free lance fiction racket; there is the type that does, and the type that doesn't—and that's the long and short of the matter. Almost everything else is extraneous; which is another reason why I have in a verjuiced and unpardonable manner throughout this book slammed other books for writers. If you are the type that gets by in this hard boiled racket, you will fall roughly under one of two headings: "Extrovert," or, "Introvert." (See Alfred Adler's books on this subject, if you like.)

If you are the extrovert type, and have guts, you'll get by all right if you really intend to crash the racket.

If you are the introvert type you will have more troubles, and I would certainly sympathize with them more because I am myself a confirmed introvert. One of the main troubles you will have will be with your undying fondness for good writing. You will be tempted to write one thing and read another. You may be clever enough to do this; but it will ever so greatly add to your difficulties as you muscle in; and even after you have connected to some extent, the habit of reading real literature, whatever that is, will interfere with your day's production of merchandisable ordure. It is a matter, of course, which has to be left to your own discretion. I offer only honest and deeply sincere advice. Do one of two things: Give up all thought of the commercial side of writing; write for pleasure and try to find some other occupation for a livelihood that you can bear; or, if you are going into the thing at all, go whole hog. Forget all about great writing. Put it behind you, until, perhaps, some day, you are independent enough to spend your declining years enjoying it. Read only the magazines to which you intend to contribute; read only the kind of novels that you are going to write and sell.

Read them even if they gag and bore you to the point of desperation. It's sound business. The psychological effect of writing moron mash for money on the

one hand, and reading beautiful writing in between times, is maddening.

The two things hopelessly conflict; the subconsciousness, despite anything you can do to prevent it, will diabolically insert a real pearl here and there upon the strings of five and ten cent pearls you are threading for swine, and this, you will readily see, won't do. In fact, if you will, it destroys artistic unities, in reverse, as it were. The real pearls will confound and annoy editors, and puzzle popular readers into a conviction that there is something wrong with *you*, and the editor of the magazine. And let us introverts not congratulate each other too heavily upon our fancied superiority. It is really a sort of failure in life adjustment from which we suffer, and for us even Adler can only grudgingly say:

"Every neurotic is partly in the right."

chapter--

XX

AMANUENSES

"If you want a thing done right, do it yourself."

GOD

THE WELL HEELED BEGINNING WRITER can, of course, afford an amanuensis. Whether this is a privilege or the greatest of nuisances no writer I know, who has tried the thing, has ever been able to decide.

In the past I have had a long line of stenographers and other "help." I dispensed with them, but I must say that far from missing them, I accomplished a great deal more without them, and with ever so much less trouble and annoyance.

A stenographer capable of taking an author's dictation, especially the dictation of an author who, beside being irascible, can talk and dictate faster than he can think, comes very high. The only one I ever had who could do it was a male court reporter of years' experience. He wanted $75.00 per week, for a five hour work day and a five day week. And he was worth it; but he

was too expensive a luxury for me, especially as I couldn't very well arrange regularly to utilize his time with two and a half hours' dictation every one of his five work days, and two and a half hours left for transcription. Furthermore, he sometimes wanted to keep a luncheon engagement in the middle of a paragraph, which was inconvenient and downright dangerous for heroines left in Byzantine bathtubs with villains climbing in the window.

I used to call up this court reporter to come out and take dictation when I felt steamed up for it; and by the time he got there I didn't feel like it—but on the few occasions when things did click all around it was wonderful going and he never missed a word or asked me to repeat anything.

Ordinary stenographers are useless to an author who turns out a regular production. It takes about five years to build an ordinary stenographer into a writer's stenographer, and long before that she's married or gone to California to live with her aunt; or gotten another job where she won't have to work so hard. This causes endless trouble; it makes necessary conditionings and reconditionings that put authors into states which make them fit to be tied up.

If you start writing with a pencil and recopying on the typewriter, or having someone else recopy it, the readjustment later to dictation or to straight typing is simply man killing; for the reason that an entire change of mind tempo must be achieved. It takes about six months

to break down the handwriting conditioning and build up a speedier one.

However, I am told that even to authors who go in for heavy regular production the pencil writing plan is excellent, since it automatically checks expression to a moderate speed and causes invariable ratiocination before transcription. This seems to me rot, since the mind can work like chain lightning in all other professions, so why not in writing—but there may be something in it.

There are typists in New York, and excellent ones, to whom such hand written scripts may be sent for typing. The best of them turn out marvelous copy at not prohibitive rates and will even correct minor errors and do editing on the manuscript if desired. Care should be taken to get in touch with one of the real professionals in this typing work, however; every stenographer who can't hold a job gets at one time or another the notion of inserting an ad. in the writer's magazines offering to type authors' manuscripts.

One typewriter company makes an electrical typewriter which their salesmen will tell you can write *Saturday Evening Post* stories all by itself, if you just give it a reliable formula plot to work on. Some of my writer friends have these machines. They seem to work splendidly, after you grow accustomed to them; but they sort of spring at you, at first, and I shall take no chances on being snapped at by a typewriter.

This business of writing fiction is an extremely individual one. There seems to be no way of getting out of

doing all of it yourself. Which is a blessing. It is the one thing left on earth that can't be incorporated, or formed into a chain. I'm satisfied to do all of the work myself; but it's a controversial matter—I have at least pointed out to you some of the drawbacks inherent in the help you may think of at the outset.

chapter--

XXI

CLINICAL ARCANA—LIQUOR, WOMEN AND THE WRITER

"Be a secret to others or you grow vulgar to yourself. Give yourself wholly only to your work."

JACOB WASSERMANN

DON'T BE WEARY OR FAINT OF HEART; I am not going to continue to feed you scraps for many pages longer; there are just these little things to be cleared up before we come to the dessert. And I promise you dessert that will surprise you. But don't cheat and look into the back of the book. I have so arranged things as to cover point by point seriatim.

One of the things I ought to warn you against is liquor, in connection with writing. It has cracked up more writers than any other one thing. And I am no prohibitionist. But liquor—! What I have seen it do to writers! Try not to be even the slightest bit under the influence of liquor *ever* when you write. If you are, you will immediately set up a conditioning that is almost

impossible to break. Read Menninger's "The Human Mind" (Knopf). See what he has there to say about liquor and the reasons why it is used—and Mr. Menninger is no more a prohibitionist than am I.

If you set up the liquor conditioning, you are, from that time on, going to have harrowing difficulties. Your conditioning to it will call for more and more liquor when you write, until you come to the point where the whole situation becomes impossible; then you will have to give up writing, because it has conditioned you to such an overuse of liquor that not to do something about the situation at once would be disastrous.

The worst thing about the liquor conditioned reflex toward writing is its insidiousness. I told you back in chapter umpty ump that if when "mentally becalmed," with a corollary of physical benumbment, you nevertheless wrote on, or used caffeine, you would discover months later when you saw what you had written that day in print that it was no worse than your usual output, though at the time you felt you were writing far more poorly than usual.

Just the opposite is true with the use of liquor. You will feel that you are writing superbly; and later, when, quite soberly you view it, or some editor views it, it will be obvious that it is impaired by the liquor you had and held at the time of writing.

This is a very serious matter. I could fill the next few pages with the names of writers I have known who showed promise and got off to a good start then cracked

up under liquor; I could fill more pages with the names of writers now writing and selling to tenth rate mediums who could easily sell to first rate ones but for their liquor conditioning to writing.

I know three writers, and good ones, who, in the past ten years, killed themselves when they became so conditioned to writing through liquor that they could not write without it, and could not drink enough to write with it after they had periodically increased the shots necessary. To be fair it is equally true that I know a few writers who drink a little all of the time when they write and are apparently none the worse for it; but the rule is as I told you. Believe me, without reservations, for once, and lay off the liquor conditioned reflex to writing.

Liquor and women . . . everyone thinks of the two things in connection with male authors; and not without justification. Almost all of the male writers I know are more continent as to both liquor and women than most of the Babbitts I know; but because writers do not view sex as sin, they are reputed to be more promiscuous than most Americans, merely because they are less hypocritical and not inclined to sneak while about their "sinning."

And at this point belongs another tip and another writer's secret, which is certainly not new with me, or with this age of writers. It applies more to writing as an art, whatever that is, than to writing as a business. But it works splendidly in writing as a business too—though,

like liquor, it is a matter for your own absolute personal discretion. (If you are one of those cringing perverts who wince at the thought of sex and hence feel angry with me for frightening you with so much talk of it in this volume, let me assure you that I cannot, in honesty, do otherwise. I know—and not a tinge of controversial obliqueness applies here—that the matter is so bound up with all writing that to overlook it would be deliberately to cheat my readers.)

If you have not read the whole of Havelock Ellis, you ought at once to do so. There is more useful information in Ellis, for a writer, than in any other set of books on earth.

Just as, a few chapters back, I told you that most stories and novels were sex novels indirectly, even though they did not seem to be directly, the magnetism of sex has everything to do either with an author's inspiration, or with his perspiration. Dos Passos, by the way, remarked in one of his books: "Forever the uninspired are mistaking perspiration for inspiration."

It will be well not to *mistake* perspiration for inspiration; but there is no need for Mr. Dos Passos sneering at perspiration because he writes only under inspiration. He is a true artist, whatever that is, but doesn't, I am sorry to report, make much money. Not that he wants to; he is sufficiently clever to make thousands writing cheap novels that would sell widely, and go into the movies if he wished. He is after something far better—and so would you and I be, I hope, if we could get it, as

Mr. Dos Passos can; but it is well to recognize one's own limitations.

Either perspiration or inspiration can be worked up to an astonishing degree by sexual abstinence. Now, for goodness sake, don't misunderstand me and subject your loved ones to what they may describe, when they go to Reno, as "extreme cruelty" (with thorough justification).

This inspiration or perspiration forcing, works with varying degrees of success in various types of personalities; according to whether they are medium sexed, under sexed or over sexed.

It works as well with homosexuals, male or female, as with those "normally" sexed—whatever that is. The Lesbian writer, deprived for a time of the object of her affections by some "nasty man," writes a novel that sells to capacity in several countries. She thinks that she does this because her "soul is aflame."

Actually, she is just diverting her temporary unspentness into another channel. She does so, of necessity, because she, too, suffers for a short time—long enough fortunately to get a novel done—from the universal delusion that the transitive sex verb can take only one object.

Sexual expression is never really restrained or inhibited; it breaks out into some other form of activity. If it *doesn't*, look out! . . . There's where most insanity comes from. Those who inhibit and do not "sublimate" nature's strongest drive into another form

of energetic activity become victims of *dementia praecox* frequently, victims of paranoia in its various forms, and almost always neurotics of some sort.

Unless you are far undersexed, if you sit down to write the morning after a lot of sexual acrobatics, you will not write as well as you will when you are a trifle in need of the sexual cloaca. In some this holds true to an amazing degree; to the point where anything written right after sexual exercises is junk, while things written when tortured by desire are as though written by another writer altogether, with ten times the ability.

As a general rule, in writing a novel, if you will abstain sexually for some time before beginning, and all during it, you will write a far better novel of *any kind*, because the sex magnetism energy will translate itself into other forms; into the form over which you are expending energies. Why this should be, since the one is largely physical and the other largely mental, I cannot explain; nor can anyone—but it is so, and I speak with the full color of consent and authority of my writing friends. I think not one dissenting voice might be raised —unless it would be Edgar Guest; but he is not a writer, he is an advertising copywriter who specializes in homilies—that's something else altogether.

But, as I said, don't carry the thing too far; and when you have your novel or stories done, for the good of your mental and physical health throw yourself into a sex "debauch," if you can stand it and are not irritated and bored by it. I ought to tell you in all honesty, since

I have been so disgustingly frank throughout, that when you do, after sustained writing effort, throw yourself into sex with a vengeance, you won't enjoy it as much as you did in the old days before writing; because, believe it or not—of course you won't believe it, reading it here, but wait and see—you won't *need* sex so much. You will, by some strange transference, which I know to be true universally, have worked off a lot of sex industry even in writing an oblique sex story called a detective story, wherein sex stalks disguised as sadism and excitement through pages of man's inhumanity to man.

chapter - -

XXII

AUTHORS' ECONOMICS

"Why should our generation be expected to find an answer to problems that have endured through centuries?"

I. A. R. WYLIE

IN THE REGION OF ECONOMICS, IT SEEMS to me, lie the author's most grievous problems . . . problems, surely, which are no fault of our present economic era, since authors have ever been troubled with this egregious part and parcel of the mood creative.

It rather seems to me that the author nowadays is getting a much better shake of it than in former generations.

Roosevelt, it would appear, has done all he could to shake the throttling grasp of note shavers from our national life. . . . As a profound and sincere, though, I hope, happy, cynic, I have for many years viewed our long succession of presidents with nausea. In fact, it has always seemed to me that our Democratic process of selecting politicians insures our hauling to Washing-

ton the lowest scum from our forty-eight states; that is to say, in order to get to Washington, and get on the government payroll, it is necessary to be a rabble rouser, a liar, a scoundrel, a thief, and a sickening weakling with a flair for supporting relatives at the government's expense.

So much the more surprising is it then that by some miracle of the workings at long last of the Law of Compensation we have come upon a president who, I hope, will set a spell in the White House; because when he dies, I predict it will be many a long year before such another man will show up in the American political offing.

Concerning one of Mr. Roosevelt's gifts to the writing fraternity I am somewhat dubious. It seems to me that the W. P. A. writer's division spends overmuch time trying to make tenth rate geniuses out of fiftieth rate hacks; when it could, did it employ practical supervisors, turn some of them into income producing units.

However, I doubt that that is Mr. Roosevelt's fault really—he has been so busy trying to keep corporations from enslaving us all that it is hardly conceivable that he could personally supervise the problems of writers.

But anyhow he tried—he went further in that direction than any head of any country since time began; and if he would put a veteran like Professor Pitkin at the helm of the W. P. A. writer's division—and mayhap he later will—the thing might work out excellently.

In the meantime, W. P. A. or no W. P. A., I get end-

less letters from men and women who, obviously, are good prospects for editors and publishers in the years to come.

They are men and women who show a distinct flair, or knack, for commercial writing, and I help them whenever or wherever I can; but usually their problems are well-nigh insoluble.

Most of them, of course, suffer from feverish impatience. They know they can produce salable copy, and they cannot understand why in the world some editor or publisher won't help them to get at the thing on a sound economic basis.

One reason why a sound economic basis for action is not arrived at is that editors and publishers, no less in this generation than in former ones, are almost invariably economic idiots.

I mean that they have economic blind spots in their brains, however shrewd they may be in other quarters.

Offhand, any reasonable man with even a faint knowledge of merchandising would say that it would be good business for an editor, any editor, when he finds a new young writer of promise, to subsidize him.

That is what Hollywood does, and because Hollywood does it, Hollywood makes millions where editors and publishers nowadays make pin money.

It is the custom to laugh at Hollywood for its gaucheries; but I am not so sure that the joke isn't on the Eastern publishers.

Offhand any reasonable man with even a faint knowl-

edge of merchandising would say that it would be good business for a publisher of books, when he finds a new young writer of promise, to make it possible for him to produce regularly without having his time and his peace of mind disrupted by hopeless economic tangles.

A few book publishers have done this with excellent results. They have given their authors sums of money over a period of years with which to operate frugally, and calmly built them up until they were valued units for large profits.

I know of several such cases. One in particular wherein the publisher took out thousands of dollars for every ten dollar bill he invested.

I do not give the name of the author here for fear of embarrassing him; but when he was twenty-five he wrote a book that sold eleven thousand copies. His publisher carried him for nearly five years, and three years ago he wrote a book that sold sixty thousand copies; and now the yearly take his publisher has on him would make even a motion picture producer jealous.

But, unfortunately, the economic consciousness of most publishers and editors is still that of a child of twelve.

And so, in considering the economic side of writing, facing the editor and the book publisher, we must consider that we are dealing with men of an extremely low economic I. Q.

Since they haven't got the common sense intelligently to finance us, so that we may become profit units for

them, we shall need to—until somebody instills a degree of intelligence into these wights—finance ourselves.

A great many free lance authors do intelligently and wisely finance themselves.

Usually when one comes upon a magazine or book writer who is likely to become of any use to a magazine editor or a book publisher, one finds a writer who complacently expects to spend about five years learning his trade and building up his name to the point where he can support himself solely upon his earnings as a writer.

The approach to this situation is very similar to that of a young man or young woman who wishes to become a lawyer or a doctor—with one essential difference.

The young embryo doctor or lawyer must *be in one place*. That is, if the young doctor or lawyer has graduated, he must remain in a given neighborhood, reasonably sober, where he can be found when needed.

Also, before he has graduated, he must remain in one place in order to go to school. This puts him under a heavier expense, usually, than if he were free to roam about as he chooses in whatever locality he may find best fitted to his economic needs.

Concretely, then, I would advise the aspiring writer to spend a year or two, or whatever time is necessary, saving up a small sum with which to leave whatever locality he may be in, if he is living in one of the expensive metropolitan localities; or even in the smaller towns

where rents are high and food costs above what they may be in other localities.

If he can borrow a sum sufficient to leave such a locality for a year or so, so much the better; nobody ever expects an author to pay back anything he borrows.

There are places all over the world, and even in the United States, where authors may go and live among their kind, cheaply, and happily (their wives dissenting of course) during their probationary periods.

Given any kind of transportation . . . even a wobbly Ford that will stagger along twenty-five miles an hour, it is far cheaper for the beginning writer to live in New England, during the summer, and in Florida during the winter, than it would be for him to remain at home.

There are places, for instance, all along Cape Cod, from Buzzard's Bay to Provincetown, where the novitiate writer can hole in from the middle of May to the middle of September in perfect comfort, and live for a minimum that could not be reached in any city or town of ten thousand or over.

I would not advise beginning authors to try such experiments, however, until they have concrete proof, in the form of several sales to several magazines, that they are shaping up into sound commercial copy producers.

Once this proof has been had and held I do think that the beginning writer should investigate the small places in Florida, during the winter, and in New England

during the summer, ascertain what minimum sum he may live upon, and, if possible, calculate how much it will cost him to have one free year in such surroundings.

If the tyro author is a young man or young woman who has been employed regularly in a city or town community, and he tries to free lance in that community, he will be under the necessity of maintaining a certain "front," at some extra cost over and above what a free lance really needs.

In the small towns, South and North, where free lances hole in winter and summer, many of these expenses can be obviated.

The car need not be Simonized for the edification of the neighbors; clothes need not be pressed; one's old clothes will last for several years in such communities, since nobody makes the Babbitt observations common to most bourgeois American communities. There are a thousand and one ways that expenses may be cut down when there are not the watchful eyes of the Joneses next door with which to contend.

Such a nomadic, and, to a degree pagan, life, rather confounds and disorientates the beginning free lance who has been accustomed to punching a time clock at eight thirty, with a white collar on and his shoes shined; but I have noticed for years that this disorientation is extremely good for the beginner. It brings out all the capacities of his knack or his flair which would, normally, remain frozen in the community to which he is accustomed.

But I would definitely not advise the beginning writer to tear up his roots and rush off nomadically until he knows *precisely* where he is going and *precisely* what it is going to cost him, per month, for six months or a year.

However, if he has sold, let us say, six stories, or a book or two, which is pretty good proof that he has the commercial writing knack, or flair; and if he has sufficient to finance himself in a new background where his expenses will be a fraction of those to which he is accustomed, the chances are *very* good that before the six months' or year's period is up and his funds are gone, he will have sold sufficient material to go on another year or so.

To those living on the Eastern Seaboard, I would suggest that previous to any such experiment they take an excursion up into the New England regions to look the situation over; if the experiment is to be for the May to September New England period; or to Charleston, South Carolina, Beaufort, South Carolina, Brunswick, Georgia, Sea Island, Georgia, and points South, if the experiment is to be for the winter period.

To those in the middle West there are Northern Wisconsin and Deep South points where authors may live on as low as fifty dollars per month and, if they are really troopers, take it and like it.

Of course, West of the Mississippi there are places in Colorado, such as Boulder, where cabins may be had for as low as ten dollars a month; and throughout Cali-

fornia, Arizona and Northern Mexico, ideal locations where writers are now living in something approaching luxury for as low as seventy-five dollars per month.

The thing must be thoroughly practical because I have visited these places off and on for years, and met authors living in them for astoundingly low monthly budgets; and many times I see these authors who have thus holed in for a period of from one to five years, skyrocketing into slick . . . launching best sellers, landing in Hollywood.

The most mournful, the most dire, the most unhappy lot for authors is to quit a job to free lance and *remain* where they were when they had a regular job, trying to keep up the same living standards. Probably that mistake has cracked up more promising free lances than even the proverbial and endlessly maintained stupidity and anaesthesia of most editors and publishers toward the burgeoning author.

I have wondered for years why some enterprising writer's magazine does not conduct a department in connection with the possibilities for the holing in of beginning free lances for the period of their transition from ordinary business life to the extraordinary life of a successfully practising free lance author. There is something profoundly salubrious to such beginning authors about getting out of their former backgrounds, where they will not be sneered upon by their moronic neighbors who, secretly jealous of their ambitions, annoy

them with reproaches and strafe their wives by buying more new dresses than the author's wife can afford.

Thrown on all fours in a community like, let us say, Provincetown, Massachusetts, where other ambitious souls are striving toward similar accomplishments, all the sting is taken out of this sort of thing. The author's wife can wear overalls in Provincetown all summer; she can wear nothing but a bathing suit from one end of a year to another in La Guna Beach, California; she can wear a sarong in certain small settlements on the West Coast of Florida. In Beaufort, South Carolina, it isn't necessary to shave more than once a week. In certain parts of Colorado the young author could live in a gunnysack for months, with four holes cut in it . . . well, maybe five.

For the beginning author to live in a nest of clerks and salesmen (who in their envy will do everything they can to discourage him) is usually so devitalizing as to cause a complete spiritual crack up.

Of course, throughout all this, we have the depressing problem of the author's wife, and, alas alack, his children.

Let us face it: if an author has one of those kind of wives his situation is hopeless. He had better give up, if he can't find some way to get rid of her.

If he can get rid of her he ought by all means so to do, because in all these localities I have mentioned there are delightful, care free, pagan females, who do not gripe

because they can't send forty-two dresses to the cleaners and trade in the V8 for a Packard.

If his children are of his own temperament and he can get them away from a Babbitt background and a conventional wife they will grow up under the most charming of conditions; charming in respect to healthfulness and realistic devotion to the more fundamental things of life.

Myself, I was lucky about this matter; my wife was a good sport and took care of the situation as any intelligent woman should when she sees that her own and her husband's temperaments are hopelessly dissimilar. I got custody of my daughter, and, contrary to the usual lugubrious Christian obliquies upon the rearing of female young by a male, managed to bring her up in such a manner as to preclude her ever having tuberculosis, pious fevers, or hypocritical conventional convictions.

The thing can be done. It takes courage. It takes renunciations of the things that clerks and salesmen are heir to. But there are other rewards. *And how* there are other rewards!

. . . So I would say to obstructive wives, whose husbands have proved their knacks or flairs for writing . . . let the guy go, let him even have the kids if he wants them; because if you don't, you'll be miserable anyway. . . . And to narrow minded husbands, with wives who have proved, through sales, a knack, or flair, for writing . . . turn them loose, because if you try to hold them they'll bite and snarl endlessly.

There are things of far more importance than the ambiguous state of marital fidelity, and the slavish rearing of offspring. There are clear blue skies, and nights of thunderous silences, and glamorous trails that may lead nowhere but which nevertheless are worth the following. And the end of the tale is always death and oblivion anyway; so what have you got to lose by *doing what you want to do* at whatever cost?

But don't depend on editors and publishers . . . They'll be grateful if you win out in this struggle to establish yourself, because then they can take an effortless profit on you; but until you are a profit item you'll have to fight out your own economic situation, and I do think that the fight should be carried, in the early stages, to the primitive localities. In cities, and towns, the fight is a heartbreaking one.

chapter - -

XXIII

EXCURIA—POETRY, PLAYS AND OTHER PERVERSIONS

"Within the Great Mogul's domains there are
Familiar sprites of much domestic use;
They sweep the house, and take a tidy care
Of equipage, nor garden work refuse;
But, if you meddle with their toil,
The whole, at once, you're sure to spoil."

AESOP

IN THIS ROLLICKING CANTATA YOU WILL have observed that there are several matters missing which go to make up a complete book on how to write everything in the world and sell it to every sort of publisher.

The book will have to suffer always from this defect. In the books on writing by the Brahmans you will find all these missing matters covered. I have deliberately left them out of my book, except as I will touch upon them here, because if I had included them, I should have had to do what the theologians of writing tech-

nique do; comment sagely upon that of which I know little. I am treating in this book, everything that I have sold, and therefore know something about.

Since writing the former editions of Trial and Error I have managed to write and sell a play. In the past I have written and sold one act plays, some of them for small productions, most of them for publication in book form.

But my knowledge of playwriting is thoroughly negative. I know a number of playwrights, and have witnessed the accouchements of their plays; watched plays spanked upon the bottom on opening night; watched them yell lustily, or give a hiccough and roll over dead before even the nitrate of silver could be put in their eyes.

I stood behind the scenes with one playwright, while he sprinkled his B. V. D.'s waiting for the audience to walk out on his play, or call for him; he was not sure which eventuality he most feared. They howled for him, and he went out and made an abominable curtain talk; and returned white and trembling to fumble for a drink.

I do know that play writing requires special knowledge, not only in constructing a play, but in selling it, and patching it after it is sold and in rehearsal.

Offhand, it is my conviction that you would be utterly mad to write a play and hope to sell it yourself.

But as to where you are going to get this special knowledge I have no idea.

I only know that wherever you find a specialist teaching playwriting you will get deeply into the rough.

Even the graduates of the Baker class in playwriting, the best one ever heard of, who succeeded so admirably, did so by systematically violating everything they were taught. If, in a single instance, they regarded a rule or a precept for good playwriting, their plays flopped. But a man like Baker could do this for his students:

He could give them a stage. He could confine them for certain hours per day, so that they would have to keep their minds on what they were doing. He could get actors of a sort together, and make them read the embryo writer's lines. And far more important than all of this, he could bring his weighty prestige, and the weighty prestige of the two universities for whom he taught so heavily to bear behind their work, along with miscellaneous legends of former successes from his class, that somehow the whole synthesis of this abstract and ambiguous business got his students more of a break in some quarters than they might have gotten without such legends and publicity-inculcating properties behind them. That, I am told, by a number of the successful graduates from Mr. Baker's classes, is what accounts for their successes.

I say this in no derogation of the late revered Baker, who not only would have been but *was* the first over and over again not only to admit it, but to reiterate it endlessly. The great thing about Baker was that he didn't even smell like a teacher. He took himself with

no seriousness whatever. He knew his classes were all something of a joke, but he greatly enjoyed the joke, even if it was on himself, and made his students enjoy it, even if it was also on them.

Aside from the Baker graduates, who are successful today, we find that the most outstandingly successful playwrights, with their arms to the elbows in dough, are uniformly untutored men; that is, untutored by chiropractors of playwriting.

Usually they are men who knew the theatre *before* they started playwriting, or knew it subconsciously, right in their very bones, as does Eugene O'Neill, before they started to write plays.

If I were to try to learn to be a sound playwright, and I am much too old and too shaggy a dog to learn any such acrobatic new tricks, I would shun those who teach playwriting, as I would shun complex negation in any direction. And long before I tried to sit down and write a play, I would manage to haunt theatres.

The devil about playwriting is that things when spoken do not ever sound as they do when they are written.

For instance, when I first wrote my play I thought it was as brilliant as all get out, because I am, like all of you, a novice at heart. Then it occurred to me that even though I had spoken all the dialogue out loud as I wrote it, actors do not speak as I speak; in fact cannot speak as I speak any more than I can speak as they do. So I got a group of actors out of work together—all of them

friends of mine, willing to work for drinks and *hors d' oeuvres*, and had them read my play to me.

This was the most devasting and the most disillusioning experience of my life. My friends, you have no idea how that play smelled. I blush even now to think of it.

Yet, if I were to show it to you on paper in that first form you would swear it was a brilliantly written opus; while, on the other hand, if you will go and get, let us say, such an outstanding, such a monumental play as "Children's Hour," and read it in script, you would swear it was the damndest twaddle upon which ever you laid anything.

That, in short, is the depressing part about playwriting to a novelist or short story writer. In another portion of this volume I have dwelt briefly on playwriting in connection with motion picture writing and included some thoughts on the subject borrowed from playwrights. But the outstanding fact, the depressing fact about playwriting to a novelist or a short story writer is the fact that a good play *reads* badly, and a bad play reads goodly, if I may borrow Shakespearean English.

The better it reads in script, the more it stinks in action; and, with the exception of some of the Kaufmann bundles of wise cracks in play form, the more pediculous it seems in script, the better it unfolds on the boards.

After I had had my actor friends give me a premiere performance of my play in my own home I hid in a

dark corner for days, and then went to work on it again.

I reassembled, then, those of them who would still speak to me, and some new ones, and had it read again. This time it read pretty well; but I noticed a boundless unenthusiasm on the part of all hands. Inquiring into this I found that the only thing now wrong with the play was that it couldn't possibly be played. Eleven actors could sit in chairs and read it and it wasn't so bad this second time; but all of them agreed that if it were staged the way it was now written the action would look like a lot of innocent bystanders involved with a group of college boys playing crack the whip.

I was told that as I had it written the actors would meet in head on collisions and fall into the orchestra pit. And it was true. With a piece of chalk, on my own floor, an old character actor showed me why. There were scenes which I thought very cleverly engineered where, as a matter of fact, the end of the scene would look as though somebody had yelled fire and the whole cast had gotten stuck in the exits trying to get off stage.

So, with some inkling to go on, from the diagrams on the floor that the actor had drawn me of the worst scenes' engineering difficulties; and remembering that there are very few places for an actor to get on and off a stage gracefully, I rearranged it all so that the hero would not run into the heroine and knock her unconscious when they were cued in and off.

When all this was done and everything patched up

again the play looked so utterly awful to me in script (judging it as I judge a novel, I suppose) that I thought it was ruined. But at last it could be read, and it could be acted.

All of this I could have avoided in the first place by simply hanging around some stages and talking not to wordy theologians of playwriting technique (it is super ridiculous to think of anyone not successful in the theatre teaching anyone who knows nothing about the theatre how to write plays), but talking to electricians, scene shifters, stage directors, actors, make-up men, wardrobe women; and above all getting the smell, the feel, the heft of the whole thing.

I am not under the necessity that most people who write books for writers are under to be cheerful and encouraging. I can, thank goodness, since I have not one of those smug publishers who is likely to say "Tut tut, can't you shade the truth a little to make more sales?" be discouraging if I like.

I would definitely not advise anyone to try playwriting as they can try short story writing or novel writing, by simply sitting down at home in front of a typewriter and batting out copy. It can't be done. Those who claim to have done it always got into production via play doctors, whether they will admit it or not. I would advise the playwright to go to a theatre, perhaps even one of those awful little theatres throughout the country, and there begin learning to be a playwright by acting as an assistant janitor back stage free for awhile,

if that is the best preliminary "in" he can get. I am firmly persuaded—and I can be wrong—that the best possible way to learn playwriting is to watch endless rehearsals.

There are people who sell plays without all this, for one reason or another; but there always *is* one reason or another. Writers successful in other fields of writing can sometimes bluff a producer into buying a play on the strength of their established writing names in other directions. But even that is a precarious business and usually doesn't work very well.

Radio writing is still hopelessly in the air. Nobody knows anything about it; not even those who occasionally write for the radio, and I know several. Not a studio in the country has any definite idea as to its needs, or any definite plan for dealing with authors. Most studios are run by low grade morons of the High Pressure Salesman type, who accidentally landed in their jobs. Most of them are of such low mentality that there would be no possible way for them to have an understanding with themselves concerning literary requirements, genuine or hack.

The only sales of any consequence that I know of to radio studios were of published work; novels, stories or serials, upon which the studios bought radio rights. You ought to keep as clear a title as you can to the radio rights on your published work; but there is nothing you can put into that work presently that may heighten its potentialities for radioactivity.

I am assured far and wide by people who are in the business and ought to know that the uniformly low level of radio programs, and the high degree of hopeless chaos in which radio is presently involved, is due to the fact that advertising agencies deal with writers in respect to programs.

That is, some maudlin idiot accustomed to supervising advertising copy upon how not to stink much in the summer time by using some questionable chemical under the armpits is entrusted with the revision of narrative programs, while drunken specialists on type sizes in advertising agencies supervise orchestral programs and homosexual devisers of snappy layouts for ladies' perfumes go to town on radio dialogue with their purple pencils.

At the present writing a condition still exists in respect to radio writing which has existed since the beginning: the executives in advertising agencies buy almost all radio material, and as long as they do, the present low grade of radio broadcasts will continue. It is said that there is a movement afoot to take the handling of radio scripts out of those most gaudy, appalling and eccentric of morons, the American Advertising Men (the men who write those things you see next to fiction in magazines) and put the whole matter into the hands of intelligent people.

But so far, nothing has been done about it, at least not to my knowledge. Every writer I know who deals with radio, mourns that he deals exclusively with idiots;

i.e., advertising men, and that he gets next to nothing for his work.

Mr. Aron M. Mathieu, editor of the definitive American writer's magazine, *The Writer's Digest*, has to say in one of his recent issues:

"The editor of Radio Guide just finished touring all the advertising clubs in the East and Middle West advising radio advertisers that the only way to improve radio programs is to hire back from Hollywood the literary brains of America."

In this, I think that Mr. Mathieu, and the editor of the Radio Guide are essentially right; although I have no doubt there are a couple of dollars worth of literary brains left in New York.

While such chaos exists there is definitely nothing for the serious commercial writer in the radio fields.

Eventually, of course, programs will have to be taken out of the hands of "sponsors" and, worse, of advertising agencies, and then perhaps, with order restored there may be something toward which commercial writers may look forward.

"Ghost Writing," as it is called by many authors is another branch of composition in which I have dabbled so little that I feel no right to speak upon the subject with anything approaching authority. Ghost writers do speeches and every other imaginable material for illiterates and half wits who have somehow achieved notoriety sufficient to cause magazine and book publishers

to feel that something "written by them" might be unloaded upon a credulous public.

I have occasionally written speeches for politicians and business men, and short articles that appeared under the names of various ignorant boobs; but I always felt degraded and disgusted for having had anything to do with such misrepresentation, and I did not get enough out of it to justify the effort. If I had, I wouldn't have felt so disgusted; though I would still have felt degraded. Like most free lance racketeers and other prostitutes in more useful and courageous directions, I can stand a lot of degradation, for money.

There is no regular way to set oneself up in business as a ghost writer. The thing is gone at quite simply by those I know who exercise this supernatural writing gift. They merely go to see those whom they know need speeches, books or articles written, take along the evidence of their published work; and, after acquainting the prospect with the fact that they write as spooks, try to arrive at a meeting of minds, involving, mostly, the amount of money at stake. The spiritualist who hires the spook then gives him a rough idea of what he wants himself to say, and the spook proceeds to put it into something resembling English. It is the easiest branch of writing, just as the writing of articles, any kind of articles, for any purpose whatsoever is so easy, and so much like grinding out assignments at school, that I shall waste little time on the subject here.

To write an article you find a subject that has not been too much written to death during the past two thousand

years and dilate on that subject for the length of words the magazine at which you are aiming will stand. You go to the library, haul out all the volumes of periodical digests and see what has been said the last few years on the subject, and try to say something that hasn't been said for at least an hundred years; fifty years will do for any of the magazines except those in the quality group. These periodical digests, to be found in all large libraries, contain indexed records of all the rehashes of what the early sophists said for many years back. All writers of magazine articles refer to these digests; most of them own a set, if they are Big Shots in the racket. If you are ever troubled about an idea for an article, just open the Encyclopaedia Britannica anywhere and vamp 'til ready. There is nothing new to say that hasn't been said over and over for centuries; it is only in fiction that creativeness and originality can be even faintly indulged. The quality group of magazines specialize above everything else in "fairmindedness," or the plausible appearance of it. For the quality group of magazines the effort and time needed to write the finished sort of article they want make the whole transaction unprofitable. There is nothing for the free lance racketeer in this; better leave that market to the college professors, along with the writing of essays. If you feel impelled to write essays, do so, to get them out of your way, show them to your friends and then throw them into the waste basket. There's no sale for them.

There is a whole group of free lance writing racketeers who write nothing but articles for "trade magazines,"

and house organs. There are some good, steady, mild takings in this branch of the racket; but I never heard of one such writer who cleared more than ten or twelve thousand per year specializing in that branch of writing; while it is not very hard to throw your income far over that in the fiction field. As I told you, in all sincerity, I am practically unknown, or was—until this book appeared; but I have often made more than that per year, and without working nearly so hard as the trade magazine *canaille*. They are a dull, unimaginative crew, and their trade relates far more to newspaper reporting—a dull sort of newspaper reporting—than to writing. There is nothing at all creative about it. The hardest form of writing is fiction writing; and therefore it is the best paid. Even the most abominable sort of fiction writing is to some extent creative.

If you are interested in this trade writing field you will find a thousand books on the subject, by Dr. Pangloss, in the libraries. Read them if you like; they can't do you much harm . . . but if you will just, instead, go and get a few trade magazines and read *them* you'll really learn something, and do it very quickly and easily.

As to poetry—! It is almost impossible to sell, and if you write it you'll be taken for a freak. American general education killed all poetic appreciation in this country. For years and years thousands of imbecile schoolmarms of both sexes have been torturing children with the most boring and most dreadful poetry anywhere to be found; the result was inevitable.

chapter--

XXIV

MATTERS CINEMATIC

"The events of life have never fallen into the form of the short story or the form of the poem, or into any other form."

WILLIAM SAROYAN

INTRODUCTION TO MATTERS CINEMATIC

by ROBERT LORD*

You have a badly paid routine job which bores you excessively. The work is dull. There is no future. The boss is it

* Lord, Robert: Writer and Supervisor. b. Chicago, May 1, 1902; e. University of Chicago high school and Harvard University; m. Martha Bliss, non-professional. Wrote for Warner Bros. the following screen plays and dialogues: "Lion and the Mouse," "On Trial," "So Long Letty," "The Aviator," "If I Were Single," "Women They Talk About," "On With the Show," "Gold Diggers of Broadway" and "Hold Everything." Supervised for First National the following: "Loose Ankles," "Playing Around," "The Flirting Widow," "Song of the Flame," "Show Girl in Hollywood" and "Other Men's Wives"; also "Million Dollar Collar," "My Man," "Hardboiled Rose," "Kid Gloves," "No Defense," "The Sap," "Time, Place and Girl." Became production supervisor at First National studios in 1930. 1930-31: "Big Business Girl" for First National; supervised 14 productions in 1930 for First National. In 1932: "Manhattan Parade," "Fireman,

ritable and unappreciative. But a powerful, secret force sustains you and enables you to endure your martyrdom: the certainty that you possess a talent, perhaps a genius—*you know that you can write motion-picture stories.*

For years you have been going to the movies and have come away feeling contemptuously superior. Most of the pictures seem puerile, silly, unimaginative, contrived and stale. How many hundreds of times have you told yourself, "I could write a better story than that in my sleep?"

You come home from the movies and do a lot of heavy thinking. You have a few hundred or perhaps a few thousand dollars in the bank to bolster up your confidence. You begin to recall the myriad success stories you have read: all about the boy who gave up his routine job, took the desperate chance and made the fortune. You know that Southern California is the garden spot of the world in so far as actual living conditions are concerned. . . . All this brews and churns inside you until the day arrives that you resign from your job and come to Los Angeles where fame and fortune await you.

It sounds fantastic? Sane people don't do such things? I have received many frantic letters from persons who gave up steady jobs back East and came out here because they *"knew"* they could write motion pictures.

Facts are usually unpleasant things, but they must occasionally be faced if a person is to survive economically. And the

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Save My Child," "So Big," "It's Tough to Be Famous," "Winner Take All," "Purchase Price," "The Conqueror," "You Said a Mouthful," "Frisco Jenny," "Hard to Handle." In 1933: "The Little Giant," "Heroes for Sale," "Convention City," First National. Associate producer with Warner Bros. Recent pictures: "Dames," "Wonder Bar," "Gold Diggers of 1935," "Flirtation Walk," "Bordertown," "Black Fury," "Oil for the Lamps of China," "Page Miss Glory"; screen play, "Dr. Socrates," Warner. In 1936: story and supervisor, "Colleen," Warner. Also supervised: "The Prince and the Pauper," "That Certain Woman," and "Tovaritch."

fact is that there are just about ten writers striving for every available job in this community.

Two out of these ten, because of superior talent, ability, luck or what-have-you, make a very handsome living. The next three just manage to get by. Their earnings averaged over a period of years are astonishingly small. The remaining five lead a very unattractive life indeed; scrambling, pushing, conniving, intriguing, bootlicking and driving themselves almost insane to garner quickie jobs which, in many instances, fail to provide even coffee-and-cake money.

In my humble opinion, the motion picture business does not need any more writers—for the simple reason that it seems unable to provide a decent living for more than half of the writers already out here.

You laugh at me. You know that producers are always bewailing the scarcity of good writers. Don't laugh until I attempt to explain what producers actually mean by this statement. They mean that writers possessing real creative talent as well as a sound knowledge of the technique of screen writing are rare. And so they are, rarer than an honest politician. Extraordinary creative talent has always been, is and always will be, scarce. Just in passing, it is scarcer in producers than it is in writers. The motion picture industry, and every other industry under the sun, will pay heavily for outstanding talent. My point is that it might be well to try to discover whether you are the possessor of this kind of talent or whether you are just fed up with Eastern winters.

It is taken for granted that every person who gives up his job back East and comes out here to be a free-lance writer is convinced that he possesses extraordinary, unique, outstanding creative talent. He doesn't have to prove it. He just knows it away down deep in his heart. The slight difficulty is, however, in transferring that burning conviction from the genius' heart into the head of the man who can hire him!

The man who can hire him is harassed and skeptical. Unless the executive was cold and tough he would soon make so many errors of judgment that the studio would be forced to fire him. He is skeptical, especially on the subject of writers, because he knows that writing for the motion picture business is a highly specialized trade, like glass-blowing or pretzel-bending. It is a trade that has to be learned like any other by years of bitter experience. You may be a genius but unless you know the trade, you are not worth a plugged nickel to us.

But you have burned your bridges and come out here with the express intention of learning the trade, and nobody will give you a chance to do so. That is the theme song of the struggling motion picture writers. All of us who work with writers hear it at least three times a day. The whole thing seems to be a perfect vicious circle: one must have experience to get a job and one can't get a job unless he has had experience.

Frankly, I don't know the answer to that one. I don't believe that there is any answer. All I know is that there are quite a few good, willing, conscientious, eager and fairly experienced writers for every available job. And yet, people are continually pouring into this community to become writers, equipped with very little more than an abounding faith in themselves.

If I were working in a Kansas City department store and wanted to become a motion-picture writer, here is what I should do: Hang on to my job with all the tenacity at my command so that at least I could eat regularly; then, in my spare time, I would write some magazine stories or a novel or a play. Nights, Sundays and holidays, I would keep on writing until I had achieved some recognition as a short-story writer, novelist or playwright. By that time, the chances are ten to one that some motion-picture company would offer me a job, bring me out to California and pay me a very comfortable salary while I was learning the trade of picture writing. This procedure actually works, my friends. On the writing staff of every major studio

are dozens of writers who have got into the picture business by *being invited* in.

Naturally, there are obvious disadvantages to this procedure. It is no fun to work all day at some tiresome, routine job—then, go home and try to do creative work. It is plenty tough but, I respectfully suggest, not nearly so tough as trying to break into the motion-picture business today without any kind of reputation. Furthermore, there are a lot of fairly good novelists and playwrights who have never and will never be offered studio contracts. But that does not alter the fact that the vast majority of the top motion picture writers achieved sufficient recognition in other types of writing to be *invited* to become motion-picture writers.

Just one other little secret before we close. It is much more difficult to make good pictures than it seems when you watch them from a seat in the theater. As pediculous as the picture you are watching may appear to you, remember that dozens of persons, some of them intelligent, labored for months to produce it. Silly as the story is, it has been written, rewritten, polished, strengthened and made to appear at its maximum advantage before it ever got on the screen. That is no argument, you say. You know in your heart that you can do much better. And perhaps you can. All I suggest is that you take a few reasonable precautions to keep yourself from starving to death while you are preparing to teach us how pictures should be written.

The greatest single mistake made by the neophyte in the writing of motion pictures is the feeling that such writing is a matter wholly of dialogue.

It distinctly is not.

The ideal motion picture is one that could be shot as a silent picture. Dialogue should be lagniappe.

The one most important thing to remember, in writing motion pictures, is: "Don't tell it, *Show* it."

To a lesser degree this is also true of writing plays.

Naturally I am the target for many yearly letters from writers, and among these are many from writers who have been wounded to the soul because they have written a lot of plays and nobody has had the common decency to buy them. At last some play agent, or producer, has told them the truth, that there is no action in their plays; that there is nothing but dialogue in them.

The delusion that a good motion picture and a good play are composed of dialogue entirely is almost universal among tyro motion picture writers and play writers; and nothing could be more maddening than such a delusion to a producer, play or motion picture. Such a producer has a faculty somewhat like that of the editor of a good poetry magazine, if there is any such thing as a good poetry magazine.

Those accustomed to reading and understanding good poetry have a peculiarly developed faculty for subconsciously reading the music into poems; those accustomed to producing motion pictures and plays have a faculty for seeing how they will look on the stage, or screen, as they read them.

They know that a play that is mainly dialogue would have the audience tearing the arms from the theatre seats—unless the play were by George Bernard Shaw,

Eugene O'Neill, or some such comparably accepted genius.

In the case of a new playwright, the audience will not be sympathetic if characters arrange themselves upon the stage, freeze, and tear loose thousands of cubic feet of exceedingly witty (and of course sedulously satirical) dialogue. Usually, in fact, in these instances, what the author is thinking of as dialogue is really monologue with a "straight man," to help out.

I have seen many Eastern writers of high tone and great swank come to Hollywood to become screen writers; and I have seen a number of them stay on and earn more yearly than all the presidents, vice presidents, and other stooges and Phi Beta Kappa men of the Eastern publishing market put together.

Those who stay on quickly see that what is needed in a motion picture is action, not dialogue. That if there is a story at all, it is told in action, and the dialogue is merely a decoration, and not at all the main thing.

Action is movement that *tells* something.

It is possible infinitely to complicate the simple matter of writing motion pictures, and there are books on the subject, which, if read, will produce in your mind the same sort of complexes that are produced in a young mother's mind when she spends a period of gestation reading books on how to have a baby.

There are only two main things to be known and remembered about writing motion pictures. Every successful scenarist in Hollywood follows these two main

guides to the extent that he is able, and it is all that anyone needs to know about writing motion pictures.

The first requisite is three acts. When you come to finish the picture there may be forty acts; but there should be, to begin with, the effect of three main subdivisions or acts.

Act one should state a problem very decisively.

Act two should carry the problem forward to a seemingly insoluble point.

Act three should clean up the story.

When these three main subdivisions are present the story should then be told that it could easily be made into a silent picture without even subtitles to carry it.

That, in short, is the perfect motion picture; few, indeed, can write that sort of motion picture—but those few are always in the high brackets.

The other writers in Hollywood are paid high or low salaries according as to how close they can approach this ideal picture.

An excellent example of this perfect picture technique is the motion picture, "Prince and Pauper" (Warner Brothers). The screen adaptation for this picture was written by Larry Doyle who was a master of picture technique. He was killed in an airplane crash before he saw the picture made.

The three main subdivisions in this picture are:

(A) The young prince, and the young pauper change clothes, and thus involve themselves in changed identities, so that the prince is now a beggar and has lost his

throne, and the pauper is made king when the king dies. Both the young king and the pauper are miserable in this situation.

(B) The heavy at court, discovering that the new young king is really a pauper, sends a man to kill the real king before it can be discovered that there has been a shift of identities; in the meantime the heavy proceeds to wreck the kingdom by intimidating the pauper posing as a king and causing him to sign damaging royal fiats.

(C) The hero discovers the real king, saves him from death at the hands of the heavy's henchmen, and at the risk of his life restores him to the throne.

This picture is so perfectly constructed that every word of dialogue could be stripped from it, and without even titles, THE ACTION ALONE would tell the story.

The dialogue is something added, lagniappe, decoration, a *plus* quantity added to a picture that would be all right without it.

That is the ideal motion picture technique.

Almost all writers, play and motion picture, when they first approach these mediums, feel that action and movement are the same thing, and that neither action nor movement are of much importance as compared to dialogue.

Perhaps this may be so, in a sense, in respect to arty plays and arty pictures, and if you want to tamper with art in any form you are wasting your time reading a

book like this. Or any book on any kind of writing technique.

I am talking solely of cash and carry drama, stage and cinema.

"Movement," in the interpretation of the Hollywood technique, is despised in all quarters and is found usually, today, in what are called "Indie" pictures . . . i.e. pictures made by tenth raters.

"Movement," in this connotation, has to do with such subterfuges as characters walking back and forth across rooms as they talk; lighting cigarettes, putting them out; opening windows, lowering them . . . in short all the tricks to which the ham dramatist resorts to break up dialogue or monologue with fake action.

Real action is movement that has something to do with telling the story.

It is the damndest job in the world to write a story motion picture length wholly in terms of actions; but if you can do it, and then after you've written it *add* the decoration of brilliant dialogue, or even reasonably intelligent dialogue, Hollywood will have a place for you—the entire enormous investment that Hollywood represents has to somehow find a lot of you every year to make up for those killed by airplanes, whiskey sours and the excessive use of blonds.

As to how Hollywood will find you if you can really write Hollywood style, I can only say that if you are clever enough to write like that in the first place, you

will be clever enough to be found by Hollywood in the second place.

The whole fuss and pother that rages year in and year out, as between Hollywood, and book and magazine writers, derives out of the fact that Hollywood can smell out the subjective pilers up of words who have huge critical reputations in the East, but little or no real ability.

These writers Hollywood is willing to try out over and over again, year in and year out, because, each year, as Hollywood sorts them over, a number are found, like James Hilton, Gene Fowler, and Michael Fessier who—despite their reputation with Eastern critics—really have what it takes to be an all around writer worth a lot of money to somebody and capable of entertaining the millions all over the world, instead of merely a handful of critics in New York.

About one out of ten of these critical-built writers from the East, can really write; when Hollywood finds that one out of the ten, Hollywood hangs on to him like grim death and pays him well.

To sum up then, if you want to write perfect motion pictures, it is not a question of learning a lot of dinky technique about "Dissolves, Wipes, Montages, Cuts, Fades, Pans, Trucking Shots, Sequences," and what not. The more you read about such plumbing as that, the more your mind will be confused (it is again as though you tried to learn to write something by reading treatises on how to correct proof).

To write a good motion picture you simply outline a good three act play, then write it without a word of dialogue or monologue; add the dialogue for decoration after you've told the story with *action,* not *movement,* and you've got something.

Of course, when the picture is filmed, it may be turned into the damnedest junk ever seen, because some relative of somebody's wife got the job of producing or directing it; but that's none of your business.

So many writers worry so much about the nepotism of Hollywood that they lose sight of the fact that it is the writer's job to do the script; and the producer's job to attend to the rest of it, and no writer who can write a story for motion picture representation wholly in terms of action, with three good story subdivisions in it, at least, and good dialogue added, can be so downed by the sabotage of producers' relatives that he won't keep coming again and again to the surface and finally end up with outdoor bathtubs, sclerosis of the liver, three wives on his alimony payroll, and a Dusenberg.

Of course Hollywood contains, among producers, a great many idiots; but for every producing idiot in Hollywood, I can match off an Eastern publishing executive, book or magazine, who is just as idiotic—and the only real difference as between the East and the West, in this respect, so far as we authors are concerned, is the difference between generous idiots, and stingy idiots.

chapter--

XXV

WARM PLUNGE—THE NOVEL

"My country's motto was not 'beauty in truth, truth in beauty,' but 'blessed be that man who can make two hills of corn grow where one bank of violets grew before.'"

HARRY KEMP

THERE IS NO FORM OF CREATIVE FICTION easier to accomplish than the novel.

Whether you are ready for it or not, you can start a novel and if you will follow the directions I shall give you, I guarantee that you will get a novel of some sort done; its chances of getting sold will also be greater than your chance of getting short stories sold, because in the novel field the competition is far less keen.

For some reason the amateur, who ought to view short stories with fear and trembling, is afraid, instead, of the novel.

Of course, there is every imaginable sort of novel;

and there is every imaginable definition of the novel form on the part of masterminds and obfuscators and professional describers and classifiers of every yogi.

I have told you that a short story is a story that is short; a novel is a story that is long. And a story of any kind is anything in Christ's world that you say is a story.

There is the tightly plotted novel, which starts off with a narrative hook, just as does a well written commercial short story; goes on through chapters of complication and suspense and ends with a surprise, or in a way to satisfy the reader.

There is the novel, like Mr. James Joyce's "Ulysses," the greatest novel written in our times, that starts nowhere, just as does life; sprawls around in every imaginable way, just as does life, and ends nowhere; just as does life. You will probably never write a "Ulysses," any more than I will, because in order to do so you would have to be an undisputed genius, and if you are you will have known all about it by this time without experimenting. And, anyway, nobody could teach anybody to write a novel like that. Mr. Joyce might spend his entire lifetime trying to teach a son how to do it and get nowhere.

I suppose the reason why beginning writers are so afraid of the novel is that it seems to them such a lot of words all at once. I do not remember feeling that way toward the novel form when I was a beginner; but then, no amount of words ever seemed to me a lot—as you probably have gathered, throughout!

It is said that Harper and Brothers, during the height of Oscar Wilde's fame, cabled that they would give him $50,000 for fifty thousand words. Meaning, of course, that he might write anything he wished to that length in order to earn the sum offered. Oscar is said to have wired back: "I don't know that many words"—a perfect retort to a Babbitt American publisher; though it may not have been Harper and Brothers—but it certainly sounds like the sort of thing an American publisher would naturally do. The most approved length, now, in the novel form, is somewhere between 65,000 and 75,000 words. Sixty-five thousand words is increasingly popular with publishers; but it is best to write seventy-five thousand words at least, even if you are deliberately striving to write a sixty-five thousand word novel. The publisher will then have something to cut and still preserve a full length novel of the approved wordage. All publishers are simply miserable if they can't cut something out of a novel. There is not a publisher in the United States who has the slightest faith in an author's ability to write a better novel himself than the publishing house can write with the redactor's blue pencil.

Not to cut something out of a work would be for the publisher to admit defeat and inferiority; and you can depend upon it that every novel you ever write, even if you live to write as many as H. G. Wells, will have something cut out of it by every publisher who flatters you by lending his aegis to your work.

Why does 75,000 words seem to you such a lot of words? If you write ten full length short stories, the total wordage comes to about the same, and you have considerably more trouble because of ten starts, ten finishes and ten separate organizations.

The average author takes at least two or three months to a novel; many of them take six months or a couple of years; some longer.

For a commercial novel of seventy-five thousand words I think three months is comfortable running time.

If you write one thousand words a day on a novel—and any dumb cluck can do that—you will have your first novel finished in seventy-five days, theoretically; of course there will be days you cannot write one thousand words for one reason or another. But after you have worked up a little writing facility, it oughtn't to be any trouble at all to write two or three thousand words a day. On the other hand, if you wrote only five hundred words a day you'd still get the thing done in approximately three or four months, counting in a week's la grippe, hangovers from wild parties and the visits of relatives. If you can't write five hundred words a day regularly, you're hopeless; go do something else—you're not fitted for commercial writing. Even a college professor of literature could write five hundred words a day, and there is nobody on earth more helpless facing writing.

But, you remind me, I have told you that you may

not make anything worth while out of the novel after you have finished it, even if you sell it.

True, true—but you also *may*. If you go on clerking in the offices of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, for another thirty years, at the end of that time you will have received a total salary increase of about fifteen dollars a week, and will fall into your grave with a gold watch presented for long and faithful service in your hand. What have you to lose? Novel writing is a gamble, a downright gamble. But a fascinating one.

It is never much fun to write short stories; but it is almost always great fun to write a novel. And you *may* do what I shall limn below with one novel, and your first.

You may send the thing off to a publisher and get back a note of acceptance. You write and ask him for $500.00 advance royalties. He writes back and asks you to accept $250.00. Several months go by while you pant and pine. Along comes a set of galley proofs. You are frightened to death by them, because you think you ought to know a lot of proofreader's symbols. Few authors know anything about proofreader's symbols; it's not a matter of the slightest importance. The printer will understand any sort of scratchings you put down to indicate corrections—all you have to do is call his attention to the need for a correction.

You return the proofs. Weeks pass; you all but die of suspense. Back come the page proofs. The printer

will direct you to "make pages." And you will be scared stiff; but upon looking at the proofs you will see that the pages are already made—all you need do is take out a line here or there or add one here or there, and no matter how clumsily you do it the printer will patch it up, just as the publisher will already have patched up your clumsy grammar, with a stiff correctness that is a whole lot clumsier.

You return the page proofs. Nothing happens for more weeks. And then one day the book is published. It will not occur to the publisher that you have the slightest interest in this fact, or the least curiosity to see what your book looks like in format. He will send your ten free author's copies after he has filled all the advance orders he has on hand.

You will fondly read your book—because it is your first—(along about the third you will be pained at the very sight of another book, after having written it and already read it over and over). You will discover some horrible errors that everybody missed. These, you will conclude—though nobody but you will ever notice them—spell ruin for the book. But, on the whole, you will be amazed at the way format has snapped up what you have written. You will begin to suspect yourself of being a very clever fellow.

The publisher will have had about twenty-five hundred copies of the book printed in "sheets." About five hundred of these copies, perhaps, will be bound at once. Some fool thing about the book catches hold.

Suddenly the publisher begins to get 'phone, telegraph and letter orders for more and more of the books. He all but goes into hysterics. He has, despite all of his wisdom about the book market, put across a nifty. Nine times out of ten your book will be the last one on his list that season which he had expected would do anything; all of those he thought were going to make him rich will as usual have acquired creeping paralysis shortly after leaving the presses and gone into a coma on bookstore shelves. Your book will pay for all of these.

He hastily throws in a print order for more copies.

Let's say it is a two dollar book and sells a hundred thousand copies. Why did you price your book so cheaply? You didn't, did you? Of course you didn't, you dear; you'd have put a price of $3.50 at least on it. The publisher, however, never prices his spectacular sellers high enough to earn you an extra nickel or dime a book; he priced his duds at $2.50 because he was *sure* they'd sell. Don't blame him. How could he know your book would sell spectacularly? (Don't ask me why he shouldn't have known that most of the ones he thought would sell would flop as they do on him every season.)

With a sale of a hundred thousand, allowing for your graduated royalties and for group discounts you have made around twenty thousand dollars. But, in addition, with a sale of one hundred thousand you are sure to get movie bids, resulting in a sale of those rights at, approximately, now, five to twenty grand; say it's

ten grand; that's thirty thousand dollars you've made, unless your publisher is a common thief and has stolen half your movie money by the terms of his contract. Other publishers are now bidding for you, offering better terms, as to the contract graduations affecting percent royalties. They offer you thousands in advance royalties, especially if you'll let them steal half of your motion picture rights. Foreign agents start asking for the foreign translation rights. Magazine editors write you for short stories. The thing goes on, if you are a flash in the pan, for a year or two, and you are fixed for life if you have any idea at all of taking care of money; or maybe, if you've really got the goods you go on and on—you can make a hundred thousand a year; you can, in a few years make a million dollars.

But remember, the average sale of a novel is eight hundred copies. I'm sorry.

But look: suppose your novels sell only eight hundred copies. I didn't tell you to stop everything else to write it. You can write it along on the side. Even if you are working in a department store, for fifteen dollars a week plus gratuitous insults from the floorwalker who gets twenty, you can write a few short stories each week, after you've gotten into the swing of the thing, and carry a novel along on the side; unless you have too many dates. The short stories will be your solid muscling into the fictioneer's racket; the novel will be your gambling chance. And while you are working on the novel you will be perfecting your style, your pro-

duction speed; your facility with words . . . overcoming your fears of blank white paper stuck into a typewriter.

Perhaps, after all, we are getting a bit too enthusiastic in this chapter.

I have tried so far as is in my power to refrain from the glowing enthusiasms of the average charlatan who writes a book on writing, that puts the novice in a hectic frame of mind and lets him down with a horrible thump later as a consequence.

Book publishers are commercially such a shiftless, shortsighted, and sometimes even downright thieving collection of limping tradesmen that no matter how well you do your work their inefficiency is pretty likely to let you down on an average of about ninety-nine times out of a hundred.

But there are two byproduct values to a novel that even book publishers can't take away from you.

Motion picture producers, magazine publishers, play producers, every other type of business man dealing with written work treats it in a businesslike manner by advertising it and merchandising it sensibly.

Book publishers, for the most part, ludicrously depend for merchandising upon a lot of people in New York called "critics," each of them with pet literary notions of his own, as set in their ideas as the professoriat. Each one has firmly warped into his mind *idées fixes* to the effect that there is a right and a wrong way to write a novel; i. e. his way and other ways. As a

result only by the barest chance will a majority of them feel that your novel has been written the way "it ought to be written." In this event they will advertise your novel in their superior, smug fashion by saying "This is a pretty good novel; it has this in its favor" (the part which is coincident with the particular critic's notion as to how a novel should be written) "and that in its disfavor; but on the whole the beggar has come pretty close to writing something significant." (i. e. something the critic would write if he could.)

This sort of criticism, weird as it may seem, can help your book or kill it; and until the publisher has waited to see what the critics are going to say about your book he will not, in most cases, advertise it.

Even if your book is a very bad book, it is entitled as merchandise to its chance; there are a great many people who greatly prefer very bad books; and when it comes to deciding which is a good book and which is a bad book only the very egotistical height of cold nerve could dictate such delineation on the part of a given individual who is colored in his judgment not by any Golden Mean of literary mensuration but simply by his silly prejudices, behaviorist bias, and complex matters surrounding his early environment.

It is amazing to think that an approximation of the situation may be imagined if one were to consider a set of critics examining into the merits of the output of Detroit automobile designers and craftsmen. Let us suppose an automobile critic who criticised an automo-

bile in devastating fashion because it was red, who, in his youth, had an aunt whom he loathed, who was horribly addicted to red dresses.

There are book critics who, as youths, were frustrated in their sexual desires and turned to solitary habits; this type of critic raves and moans against the sex novel.

There are critics who were born with weak stomachs, and are subconsciously biased about books full of the enjoyment of good food.

There are critics who never could get anybody to like them, so books about friendship offend them.

There are critics who have pigeon chests, and hate outdoor books; and so on, ad nauseam.

But this crew can make you or break you because publishers are silly enough to treat with them.

But aside from all this; aside from the sabotage of critics, and the simpering susceptibility of book publishers to critics, there are, as I said, two by-products to even a flop novel out of which no one can cheat you.

One of these by-products is material, and the other is spiritual.

The fact that you have published a book at all will be noted by magazine editors, motion picture story departments and so on; and it may raise your availability to magazine editors, etc., so that you will get an indirect cash increment from your efforts.

On the other hand, you can take copies of the book and *give* them to all the circulating libraries in your neighborhood, if they won't buy them, and they will

in return gratefully promote you in your own neighborhood; thus, perhaps, getting you some local prestige. . . . Since there is a delusion abroad in the land that anybody who can write a book and get it published is an infinitely superior person.

And now that I have told you the best and the worst —at least according to what lights I have—let us get on with this matter of book fabrication.

chapter - -

XXVI

SPLASHING AROUND—THE NOVEL—II

"Somewhere behind everything that everybody believes or disbelieves, is somebody's pocket."

CHARLES FORT

THE VARIETY OF NOVELS THAT YOU CAN choose from in writing yours is infinite, and as varied as the types of novels you have seen. Best of all, book publishers are almost wholly free of taboo fears. But please don't, on that account, sit down to write the customary novel amateurs write when they find this out: the novel wherein a mother falls in love with her son and has an *affaire* with him; or where a sister is had by her brother. There are publishers, and plenty of them, who might publish such a novel. Who *might*.

Far better it is that you pick out the most salable type of novel, rather than the least salable type. In fact I only have time and space here to outline one novel, and I shall, of course, outline the most salable kind about which I have the best first hand authentic information.

To come closest to the best paying commercial novel formulas you had better stick pretty consistently to the outline I shall presently give you; though you can, as in the short story, as I explained in chapters umpty, umpty ump; and ump, umpety ump, choose the less surely salable character novel, theme novel, idea novel; anything, in fact, will go, though not anything will sell so easily as the one (with a double alternative as to treatment) I shall here suggest.

To begin with, in planning the most salable type of novel you must make this decision: Honest sex, or masked sex.

"Love novels," wherein there is no frankness about love, sell better than sex novels, in which there is almost nothing but sexual frankness.

You ought to choose definitely, before beginning, between those two possible treatments of the novel I outline.

Many novels fall between two stools in this respect. In them an attempt is made to combine both theoretical love and actual love. The synthesis is obviously faulty. The two sharply different handlings of sex do not ever appeal to the same readers.

A reader of frank sex novels will all but retch at the ludicrous love scenes that go into a masked sex novel; while a habitual reader of love novels in which there is no biological frankness, will be offended and vaguely alarmed to the point of acute discomfort by your honest sex scenes. If you displease both types of popular readers

by this injudicious admixture of treatments, both may shun your next book.

I am going to work on the theory that your first novel is to be a sex novel. What I tell you of it will apply perfectly to the love novel; but will not apply to the many varied novel forms where there is no formula.

(It seems a darn shame that since one *can* get away from those loathsome formulas in the novel form one dare not do so; but I am telling you what sort of novel you can write and sell easiest.)

Go back to my earliest words concerning the tabloid story for syndicate markets. Everything that was said there applies here. Except that all of the elements are spaced more as to wordage, and the complication, unless it can be drawn out endlessly, should have more separate and distinct convolutions.

At the beginning of the book you pick up with a beautiful girl and a beautiful boy. The two spar around for awhile and then go to bed. But this will seem far too simple to the novelist and to the publisher.

Therefore, either the boy or the girl will fall in love with somebody else; possibly both of them will. There will be a lot of plain and fancy fornication in all directions, and then everything will end up in a horrible stew. (Green Bay Tree Biblical technique subconsciously demanded by the public.)

The egregious mess will go on for awhile, as the author pads along with lots of dialogue and Byzantine bathrooms, and then toward the end of the book it will

be discovered that there is something wrong with sex. It doesn't *mean* anything. (It will be to the girl, by the way, that it has come to not mean anything).

The author will carefully inform you that there is really nothing wrong or sinful about sex (nice concession for the author to make poor old Mother Nature) but it is not quite satisfying.

The reader having been hugely entertained by all this miscellaneous fornication, the author will, toward the end, turn mildly unctuous. He will end the book in a haze of something resembling mail order mysticism, wherein sex has come to mean something. The author will neglect to explain what love is. The book will end, as like as not with the heroine in some new man's bed; but *this time* what she is doing will *mean* something. Here, here, I can't have you ask me what it will mean. I ended "City Limits" that way, and I'm a liar if I have the faintest idea myself what Florence meant and what Howard meant, when they idiotically remarried after a divorce and discovered that what was between them meant something.

Now there is your plot. You can write novels for thirty years without any other plot, and do far better if you don't ever monkey with any other plot; just ring in variations on that one.

Now, down to brass cracks:

After you have read a half dozen such novels; or, if you have already a familiarity with that field of "litera-

ture," write out on your typewriter what is called a "synopsis."

A synopsis is nothing but a brief notation concerning all of the *major* (never the minor) movements in the story.

A synopsis of "City Limits" would be as follows, in its briefest possible form.

Two nutty characters, a girl named Florence and a boy named Howard, get married. They don't get along very well. Their only real interest in each other is the sexual one. They have a lot of fights and get divorced. Afterward they get married again and this time it means something.

Your synopsis of your novel can be as brief as mine in your mind; but the actual written synopsis should run somewhere between fifteen hundred and five thousand words. In it include no dialogue; no descriptions of anything; just the roughest and barest outline of the basic, fundamental story behind the novel.

You will do well to hold the main characters, especially in your first novel, down to two. You'll have sufficient trouble handling two. Aldous Huxley, in "Point Counter Point" included about a hundred characters, all of whom were convincing; but Aldous Huxley is Aldous Huxley. Few living novelists could have done it and gotten by with it; a novelist is still not quite respectable to critics and other professors of literature until he has aged in the wood.

Your synopsis should run something like this:

Howard, twenty-eight, a bachelor, living in the North Side section of Chicago, one night meets, at an elevated station, a girl named Florence. He "picks her up" and they go to a dance hall. Accustomed to picking up girls, he is nevertheless more than usually impressed with Florence because of some new and unusual quality in her. He tries to "make" her when he takes her home from the dance, but fails. He is a bit sorry for her; she seems a nice sort and he feels that he has been somewhat rough with her. For the first time the thought of marriage occurs to him.

That is approximately the outline for my first two chapters in "City Limits." But the first chapter would be many times as long as the outline.

You get the idea? Go on, through about five thousand words, roughly lining up the bedrock of the story, in the loosest, most easily available way; don't bother about style, bits of business or anything of that sort.

And don't, in the synopsis, separate the thing by chapters; run it all together as though it were one story.

Above everything else don't pack the synopsis. Seventy-five thousand words seems like a lot of words; but when you actually get down to writing the novel you'll be surprised how much less elbow room you have than you thought. Perhaps, just to be on the safe side, you had better take two or three seventy-five thousand word novels and write synopses of them before writing a synopsis of your own. Be very careful, if you do this, not, when later writing your own to "subconsciously"

or unconsciously plagiarize anything in the other novels that really belonged to the authors thereof. This will get you into plenty of trouble the moment a book house editor sees it.

When you can write a fifteen hundred to five thousand word rough outline of the main movements in a seventy-five thousand word novel of some manufacture other than your own, you will be able to write a synopsis of your own without including in it material for fifteen novels—which is what the average tyro does.

Remember, Howard had to be picked up in his room, getting dressed, and characterized a bit in that first chapter. He had to walk down the street; there were the street noises and smells and sights. Then he reached an elevated station. He observes the girl. Reacts objectively and subjectively. All of that takes a lot of words. Now be *sure* you don't cram too much into that first synopsis. Far, far better that you have too little than too much. I can't possibly do all of your thinking for you. You must somehow manage to get this synopsis done; a child could do it. Done in the roughest and readiest way possible, with primary care toward only one thing in particular; not to get too much material in it to be covered in one novel. Now, let's go on to the next step beyond the synopsis.

chapter--

XXVII

PURL ONE, DROP ONE

"In literature, today, there are plenty of good masons but few good architects."

JOUBERT

THE NEXT STEP IS TO DIVIDE THE SYNOPSIS into chapters, arbitrarily, in the following manner:

You have seventy-five thousand words with which to work; it will, of course, be all right if at the end you come out after writing the novel with a few thousand words over or less. (Excuse me for being so damned mechanical; this would horrify the hell out of an aesthete—but what wouldn't—and you'll actually get a novel written and possibly sold this way).

One of the worst difficulties amateurs have with novels is in their architecture. The turrets are likely to intimidate the bastions; and the bay windows may turn out to be larger than the left wing.

Go over your synopsis and, with a pencil, draw rough lines between sections which seem to you naturally to indicate chapters. . . . For instance, in "City Limits"

there is no real reason why, after Howard meets Florence at the elevated station, and starts for the dance hall, a new chapter should begin with the dance hall scenes; but a chapter seemed to fit in pretty well there.

In most instances where established novelists—I mean far better ones than I—do these things to which pifflers call attention in books on writing, the novelist actually doesn't have any very definite reason for what he did. It flatters some writers to have writing text book spinners talk about auctorial sapience as though novelists were wonderous wise fellows. (So few writers comment adversely upon the cult of "How to Write" martinets.)

Most authors—and the very best—stagger through novels blindly and wildly and are themselves amazed when the thing jells pretty well.

There can be, within reason, almost any number of chapters; they can be as short as five hundred words, or as long as five or ten thousand words; estimate about how many words you will need for each chapter you have outlined. Of course, if it is your first piece of writing you won't make accurate word estimates. (If you have written a few short stories you will be able to make fairly accurate estimates). The important point, however, is not that the estimates be accurate, as I shall show you in a moment, but that they shall be made at all.

Now add up the total word estimates for each chapter and see if they come anywhere near to totaling seventy-five thousand words. If they are over or short of

seventy-five thousand words, add to some of the estimates, where you think you can use more wordage on the chapter, and subtract from estimates, if you have an overplus, on chapters where you think you can use less words. See that the total of the word estimates is seventy-five thousand words.

(Don't fidget about a seeming lack of direction here; I'll get to it in a minute, where it fits.)

Next get as many full pieces of paper as there are chapters indicated on your synopsis, and, at the top of each piece of paper, head up a chapter number, and copy on the sheet only that material in the synopsis which belongs to that chapter. As you copy it, elaborate carefully upon the synopsis; not in great detail, but add in, as you rewrite from the synopsis any other little things you think of which might round out the chapter; bits of business, etc. When you have done this you will have as many separate pieces of paper as you have tentative chapters outlined, and, upon each piece of paper will be a rough idea as to what will go into the finished chapter.

Unless you are totally without ingenuity of a common, ordinary and universal sort, you will have—while transferring and recopying the synopsis, piecemeal, to and upon the sheets representing chapter outlines—about doubled your original synopsis, as to total wordage.

The whole novel is set now, in your mind, architecturally. Your "subconscious mind" will, henceforth, be

working on the whole novel—if you are really interested in writing it. Bits to be included in the finished novel will pop into your conscious mind incessantly . . . even bits of finished phrasing later to be used. . . . Apt words will suggest themselves. Dainty bits of terminology will evolve mentally.

Now you have a stack of papers, each one representing a chapter, each one headed with the tentative material to go into that chapter. File these sheets in such a way as to have them instantly available; bind them so as to make it possible at any time to insert blank sheets between chapters. Take them to work with you, if consistent, in a portfolio (loose leaf) so you can jot down stray bits for later use, on the subway, or when the boss isn't looking.

Day and night, whenever something comes to mind that would fit nicely into the novel scheme, write that something briefly, *on the chapter sheet where it belongs.*

You will find, unless you are actually *non compos mentis*, that as day after day passes, while you write the opening chapters of the novel, dozens of ideas for your various chapters will develop; jot them down on the chapter outline, so that they will recur to you, when you need them, *while you are writing the chapter in which they integrate.*

Suppose, for instance, that somewhere in the novel there is an old automobile. One day while out walking, to keep from becoming constipated, and thus coming upon an unpleasant soul state, you see an old automo-

bile which just fits the part. When you get home, turn to the chapter where the automobile first appears, and while the recollection of the motor car you saw is fresh in your mind, describe it roughly, leaving the description there carefully tucked away in its proper place to be available later when you need it, at the time you are writing that chapter.

Now, before you begin to *write* the first chapter, consider the two major characters, and any other characters that will figure prominently in the novel. Write a dossier of them. A dossier which catalogues all objective facts about them, and suggests their subjective identities. You can go to any length desired as to this. You might write two thousand words concerning each character that appears throughout the book constantly; a five hundred word sketch for an incidental character. File these dossiers at the back of the chapter outlines, where you can get at them to jot down more notes if other material anent the characters comes to you while in the bathroom. Later, while writing the finished novel, you can turn back to these character sketches and bit by bit feed them into the script. Now, unless you are going to include in your novel atmosphere or a locality that is unfamiliar to you, you are ready to go to work on the first chapter. If you are going to endeavor to use an unfamiliar background—a bad mistake most amateurs make—do please read up on it very thoroughly, not in books of fiction, but in books of fact. From this reading write descriptions, at least as long as your dossiers of

leading characters, concerning the locale of the novel. File this, too, at the back of your chapter headings. Later, while writing the novel, refer to it often and build bits of it in at apposite points.

So far you have arranged the architecture in such a way as to make it almost fool proof. Anybody can write a novel if he goes at it that way; and anybody's novel written with that careful fitting together of the integral parts at the outset will sell easier than a really good novel which is architecturally sloppy.

I promised to come back to the arbitrary setting of word lengths for chapters. Do I want you to follow that slavishly throughout the writing of the novel? Certainly not. But your whole architectural plan will crumble if you fail to do the following:

If you need five hundred words more for chapter one than you counted upon using, try to cut five hundred words out of chapter two, so that you will keep architecturally true; if you need four times as many words for chapter one as you had thought, apply the same spirit level and endeavor desperately to pay back all those words you borrowed before you get to the center of the book, by cutting down on subsequent chapters. If you needed less words for chapter one than you thought, this will be a far healthier indication. Then you can use more words for chapter two, if you like; or, you can keep what is left over in wordage as a handy ace in the hole in case you get stuck later on; but don't go through more than half of the book with a bad

overage or shortage on hand, unless you have thought of a whole new chapter to insert, in which you can use the spare wordage, or unless you have thought of an entire chapter you can relinquish, in order to allow for overplus wordage.

The moment that you say:

"Oh, to hell with it" and abandon your earlier estimates of wordage with no thought of getting back to them, that moment your novel will begin to go to pieces, and in the middle you'll probably blow up. And if you do that, you'll establish such a conditioning against the novel form in your mind that you may never try another.

Hundreds of short story writers who say they cannot write a novel say so because of some early awkward experience of this sort which forever conditioned them subconsciously against the novel form. They started to write a novel, with no thought of superstructure, and when they got the opening all nicely built up the whole thing caved in because with the opening done a hundred thousand words had been used up; or, they got the whole novel written, turned back to count the number of words, and discovered they had written a twenty-five thousand word novelette.

Still worse, they get half way through the novel and discover that nothing was planned to cover a space between one point in it and another point; or they get a quarter way through and the original idea twists itself

all out of shape and begins to become another novel altogether.

As you write, many times things will occur to you to add to the original synopsis idea; radical changes will suggest themselves; and the chances are they will be good ideas too. Allow for them by all means. Alter as many chapters as necessary to allow for these changes, if they really improve the original conception; but always, at the same time, fit them in as bricks, as well as ideas. Allow for them in wordage. Borrow wordage from one chapter and pay it to another; but always keep that seventy-five thousand word total in mind and keep a double entry set of books on it, balancing debit with credit, striking frequent trial balances to be sure that you have not gone astray in wordage somewhere.

If you use a page guide, such as you can get from the Underwood company, just behind your first white sheet and before the carbon and the second sheet. you will be able to avoid counting words, and estimate them by pages, putting an average number of words on a page. I have a guide I made myself that always puts an average of 250 words on a page over a spread of fifty or more pages. This is a great help; but if you can't or won't use a guide, then actually count the words, to be *sure* you are not going far astray. And remember, you are not going to write a seventy-five thousand word novel all at once, as you might write a short story; dón't think of it as seventy-five thousand words all in a heap. Think of it as so many words a day; five hundred words

a day; fifteen hundred, etc. Safest, by far, to start out with a very small daily wordage. If you start out with too large an one, you'll condition yourself against writing, and face with something approaching horror the daily stint. The first day write only what you can do pleasurably and easily; don't increase it until you actually feel like increasing it—it will increase itself almost automatically, don't worry about that. If you've really got anything except a feckless hope to become a novelist without doing anything very hard about it, you may start with writing one hundred words a day and wind up writing ten thousand a day, even on your first novel. But if you force an increased daily wordage, you'll set up the most awful conditioned reflex imaginable against writing anything at all for any reason whatsoever.

No, I am not going to leave you suspended in mid air on a lot of iron girders painted red shivering in the wind and racked by pneumatic drills. We'll go on from the architecture to the ornamental facade; the first chapter, and the actual writing of it. The first chapter is the most important chapter, so far as your likelihood of getting the book sold and read is concerned.

chapter--

XXVIII

COMPLETING THE NOVEL

"Prose is clothing life in the form of words."
MAX EASTMAN

IN YOUR FIRST CHAPTER SHOULD GO, above everything else, above characterization, and story incident, the narrative hook. This narrative hook may be an incident totally unrelated to the whole novel if you like—just so it injects some element of interest in the people appearing in the novel, and in what they may do next.

The narrative hook, for instance, in the first chapter of "City Limits" is simply the fact that two odd people have come together and are going to do something about it. This is *not* a good, strong narrative hook. As I said before, it will do you no good and it may do you harm to buy my books in order to study their structure; it will do me some good, but it will do you none.

Your first chapter, as I said before, is your most important chapter. Despite the fact that the liars say they don't, publishing house readers often give up a book if

its first chaper is, in their opinion, no good. Publishing house readers are much like magazine office readers, though they are usually paid a trifle more; as high as forty dollars per week for an extra good one, and usually are a bit better educated, whatever education is. Your chances of getting read in a book publishing office are ever so much greater than your chances of getting read in a magazine office.

Book publishing house readers usually read—and I know sufficient of them to be sure of my facts here—much as magazine office readers do. They look at the first chapter, then turn to the end of the book. If there is anything at all in the beginning or the ending of the book to hold them or even excite their curiosity, they will spend perhaps half an hour skipping around through the book to taste it here and there. They read very fast. Some of them read not word for word but line for line, or paragraph by paragraph—a very bad habit since in doing this they do not get the flavor of style in the book, if any.

But your first chapter is by all manner of means the deciding factor. Publishers know that when a patron goes into a book store or a circulating library, he glances at the jacket on a book. Squints at the awful brummagem which the jacket writer has perpetrated upon the flaps. Then looks at the first chapter, or at least a few pages of it; so, you see, not only your first chapter is important, the first pages of your first chapter are extremely so. And for heaven's sake do not *rewrite*, over

and over again, the first chapter and the first few pages. By thus doing you will, in yourself, establish a conditioning against first chapters that will cause you to write rotten ones for the rest of your life; in the reader you will establish a feeling of stiffness and lack of spontaneity.

Start, if possible, in quotes, for the first line of the first page of your first chapter. That is, have a character saying something to another character. Then, if possible, follow with a few lines of *movement*. . . . Any sort of movement. Readers are restless in this respect. Under no circumstances, or for any reason whatsoever, bother the reader in the first chapter with what any character is *thinking*.

If you think that this is a dirty trick indulged only by free lance commercial fictioneers, listen to this:

"Experience causes apprehension that we are again to be delayed by descriptions, and an exposition of feelings; taken for granted, of course, in a serious narrative; which it really seems these moderns think designed for a frequent arrest of the actors in the story and a searching of the internal state of this one or that one of them; who is laid out stark naked and probed and expounded, like as in the celebrated picture by a great painter; and we, thirsting for events as we are, are to stop to enjoy a lecture on anatomy. And all the while the windows of the lecture room are rattling, if not the whole fabric shaking, with exterior occurrences or impatience for them to come to pass. Every explanation is sure to be

offered by the course events may take; so do, in mercy, let us bide for them." That is George Meredith broadcasting, in "The Amazing Marriage." (Charles Scribner's Sons.)

Now, actually beginning to transpose your synopsis, which is "expository" writing, into narrative, or dramatic writing, you come smack up against the very elements of the trade of writing, whatever kind of writing it may be. Nobody can teach you how to do that. You must teach yourself. Every writer who ever wrote, every writer writing today taught himself to do that. I will not say it is not hard. It is plenty hard. It is as hard as it is to reach into an abdomen and clip out an appendix without spilling material that will infect; it is as hard as it is to stand before twelve dunces and argue them out of their natural sadistic desire to send some unlucky dullard without political influence or money to the electric chair. It is as hard as it is to look an at least partly sane person in the face and calmly tell him, when he is tortured by a cancer on his podex, that there is "no sensation in matter," and manage to collect from him without assault, for the information.

But it can't be hopelessly hard, since hundreds of people yearly learn to do it, providing they don't get all tangled up in ideology after consulting clairvoyants of technique.

Be glad that it is hard. Wish that it were more difficult than it is; for this is your protection, when you have learned it, from too much competition. Only this

I can promise you—that even though you have no gifts whatever for writing, no knack, education, knowledge, imagination; no common sense, intelligence, anything, you can still learn to write commercial fiction and sell it, if you have really made up your mind to do so. If you really are a downright simpleton this very fact may make things easier for you in the free lance commercial fiction racket, for nine-tenths of all stories and novels are in America read by ninnies who may understand you far better if you are a kindred spirit.

You could not learn to write literature, whatever that is, by simply making up your mind to do it; no, not even if you had a will like Mussolini's.

All I can give you here is a rough idea as to how to go about turning exposition into the various sorts of narrative writing.

The way to learn really to appreciate poetry is to read it aloud at first, "singing" it, or chanting it, in the order of rhythm and metrical feet indicated by the poet. Nobody in America reads poetry that way or any other way any more because the best poems and the best poets raise hell with conventional flubdubbery and frighten the bourgeoisie, hence only rotten poetry can be taught in schools; all worthless poets seem always to have cleaved to bourgeoisie ideals about religion and morals.

After singing poetry for awhile, you establish a musical "ear" for it, and you can then read it silently

and still inwardly hear the song that accompanies the words (in good poetry).

If at first you will yourself *speak aloud* every line of dialogue you write, all through your first novel, you will establish the same sort of conditioning toward good dialogue within yourself. And if you speak it aloud yourself, before writing it, as though you were talking to the character in the book toward whom the dialogue is directed, you will be far more likely to write dialogue that is realistic and not "stilted" or stiff. Remember, in writing dialogue, that not even very well educated people *speak* correctly when talking rapidly and informally. They slur words; they make grammatical errors; they butcher syntax. Participles trail and hang to hell and gone. Of rhetorical effect there is not any. The moment your characters begin to make long speeches that get over rhetorical effects, the publisher's reader will know that he is dealing with a hopeless ham.

The movement on the part of the characters; the scenes in which they move should be *visualized* (seen inwardly) as clearly as possible. Do not be baffled here. In the books of the technicians there is always recommended a perfection of visualization which is simply impossible. Visualization is hard, dreadfully hard; and you cannot, by consciously straining as the masterminds will tell you—the masterminds who do not themselves visualize anything—learn to do it. The more stressful conscious striving you employ toward visuali-

zation, the more adverse conditioning you will set up as against ever learning to visualize well.

Be resigned to expect that your early books and stories will all show weakness in this department. It will be evident to those who sense such things keenly that you are not good at visualizing what you write. Instead of attempting to jerk yourself up by your boot straps, in this particular, as the masterminds instruct you to do, be content with that degree of visualization which it is at first possible for you easily to attain, without overstrain.

It would be preternatural for your early work to show all of the perfection exhibited in the work of great writers, or in the work of experienced fiction racketeers; editors will not expect that your copy should hold up under such severe scrutiny.

Almost all novels suffer from defects in the visualization department, and this defect is perfectly obvious to critics. And since critics have never tried visualizing anything they are quick to yelp about it; but don't mind them, nobody does any more. Only the very great novels, the masterpieces of literature, show accomplished visualization.

Many writers making lots of money today visualize very poorly; so don't break your heart over the matter; do the best you can at first; consciously, to begin with. Subconsciously and automatically as you go on writing, you will improve in visualization without distressing attention given to the matter.

Almost all of the horrendous agonies of beginning writers are due to this visualization matter. They say: "I can't write." What they mean is: "I can't write as well as do those who visualize expertly." The whole trouble is in this visualization; *all* of that vague inability that you feel is right there; for no matter how slender your writing gifts may be you *can* write what you can mentally see. The universal mistake comes when the beginning writer fails to understand this, and goes into hysterics, instead of patiently learning to visualize by more writing. The fact that your first stuff looks terrible is due to the fact that you visualize poorly —and newspaper syndicate editors who buy tabloid stories won't care—so, you see, I wasn't such a horse's north end as you thought, for aiming you, at first, where low visibility nevertheless permits bull's eyes.

The dialogue for your first chapter will take care of itself if you *speak* it before you write it. Take first one character part and then another, like an actor, as you speak the dialogue aloud.

Your dialogue, on the first page of your first novel, can be as good as any dialogue ever written by genius or big money hack in any age, if you will just do this vocalizing. You see, now, perhaps more clearly, why most free lance racketeers bear down heavily on dialogue; and perhaps you see why I lectured you on it to the point of exhaustion a few chapters back. And you also probably see by this time what a doublecrosser I

am; if I'd told you about these things in the first chapters you'd have given up.

Now look at the first thing indicated on your chapter on synopsis fragment.

. . . *Howard walks down the street to the elevated station.*

When you write what is in italics above, you write "exposition"; which is to say you do not write at all.

Now you must write "narrative"; or, if you wish to call it that, "drama." The latter word is used roughly in this connection, in the free lance racket, in order to have some word to cover a meaning which it covers almost to the point of suffocation.

Out of the bare stark line, "Howard walks down the street to the elevated station," steps Howard, actually walking down a particular street, to a particular elevated station; walking in a characteristic way, at a given time of day; it is cold or it is warm; it is dry or it is raining. Howard feels well, or he snuffles. If he snuffles and wipes his nose on his sleeve, or if he snuffles and caresses his proboscis with a neat, clean handkerchief, characterization has already started inferentially, and not obtrusively.

There are noises on the street; there may be odors. He touches something and the reader gets a tactile impression. He passes others. He has on something characteristic of him. He gives the girl at the elevated wicket a dime, or he gives her a dollar bill. If he shoves the change into his pocket without counting it, you

have more excellent characterization painlessly administered to the reader; if he counts his change carefully there is characterization in that.

I put no especial chapter in this dizzy lexicon of auctorial pseudo-magics concerning characterization, because the male and female schoolmarms have wrangled over it for years until it is such a complicated matter that no beginning author who has ever read a book on authorship can face the thought of characterization with anything save an overwhelming conditioned reflex of terror.

There is no such thing as characterization in writing, in the especial sense of which the professoriat speak of it. *Characterization is an accident that flows out of action and dialogue;* and if I were you I would never pay the slightest attention to characterization or give it a thought . . . unless you have already all but ruined your chances of becoming a writer by reading book after book wherein characterization was treated like a Hex charm to be manipulated only after willow wands had been buttered and the moon was in total eclipse by Halley's comet. If you have never read any of this voodoo your chances for learning to write easily are infinitely greater; and if any non-writing writing master ever tries to hex you with his conditioned reflex of dark characterization thaumaturgy, get a flying start and push in his face.

To go from face pushing back to what we started with in this chapter: the very best story opening I ever

saw, for commercial purposes, is the opening to Daudet's novel "Sappho." You can obtain this novel at any public library, and I urge that you do go and get it and at least read the first chapter.

That first chapter is, I think, the most perfect opening chapter for a commercial novel ever written by anybody at any time. It doesn't make any difference about the translator; the flawless commercial technique would survive even Esperanto, the most unintelligible hodgepodge of language on earth, next to what is called "English" by an Iowa high school principal.

It is said that Daudet maintained a "fiction factory," where several persons, under his direction, manufactured and sold fiction as Henry Ford manufactures and sells animated junk. If he did, there is nothing of this discoverable in "Sappho" unless it is that opening chapter which certainly exhibits a knowledge of tricky commercial technique that for all time fixes Daudet as the Alphonse Capone of the fiction racket.

All of the rest of your chapters merely repeat what is essayed in the first; with the difference that you need not strain so very much about them; if the first few chapters are pretty good—and if you have an original variation or two for the formula I have given you over and over again from the first to the last of this volume, you will write a salable novel.

chapter--

XXIX

RESEARCH

"In the fields of observation, chance favours only the prepared mind."

PASTEUR

THERE IS A TYPE OF MIND, THE PRAGmatic, factual, objective sort, to which fiction will always remain a task and an odious chore.

In this category some of the greatest writers of the ages have belonged.

They are the great writers of historical novels.

What differentiates them from newspaper reporters, trade magazine journalists, gossip columnists and other such anti-social writers is a curious faculty for being able to swing from fact into fantasy, *providing they first have the fact.*

I have seen so many of these pragmatic writers crack up monstrously through the sheer determination not to recognize themselves for what they are; when, had they simply faced the situation honestly with themselves they might have done supremely well.

If you simply can't imagine a plot, or a story, the

pages of history contain enough plots, and enough stories, to keep all the writers in the world busy for all the years that the world will last.

For example, some years ago, in the tubercular little town of Richmond, Virginia, where people still worship their ancestors as they do in China, I met a writer from New York.

He had been an editor—and a good one—for one of the gaudy slick paper magazines. He had written two novels under a pen name, of which he was sincerely ashamed. He had contributed stories and articles to various slick paper magazines, and he was a nice sort; young, in good health, and thoroughly miserable.

He was miserable because he was taking it for granted that since he had been able to sell fiction he could write fiction. As a matter of fact he could not write straight fiction. And yet he was a thoroughly sound writer of some sort, I could see that even then.

He had been born and reared in Richmond, Virginia, and instead of belonging to one of the mentally and physically tubercular F. F. V. old families of Virginia, he came of good, healthy, mentally and physically vigorous stock. He was good looking, made friends easily, well educated, well read, and had, seemingly, everything in his favor. Yet, as I say, he was miserable.

His opinion of himself was appalling; he considered himself a thorough failure. He had built up an inferiority complex that was sufficiently heavy to crush half a dozen men his age. I wasn't doing so well myself in

those days. Those were the times when the country was in process of crawling out from under the peasant obscenities of democracy and working toward something more realistic.

We spent about a year, then, seeing each other very often, and getting to like each other better.

Finally I left Richmond and went to New England for a season, meeting him again in New York the following season on my way to Florida.

Again, in New York, he was in the depths of despair about himself, and still trying to write pure fiction; why he couldn't do so was not clear to me. He seemed to have all the requirements; so far as I could see. I am going into great detail about his case because since that time I have run across a dozen others like him, and I know now what ails them and am often able to help them.

He went through several more unsuccessful, miserable years—though I did not see him after that—got married, gave up his new York ambitions in despair, and returned to Richmond, presumably to vegetate and descend into the depths of frustrated middle age.

And then one day in the middle west I was amazed to see a novel listed on the best seller list of a large paper, under his name. I could hardly believe my eyes. That has been some months ago; since that time his book has been on about sixty percent of the best seller lists across the country; and now, though I am not in touch with him, I know what is happening to him. He

is getting letters from editors of magazines, begging him for short stories and articles. He is being politely pursued by agents and other publishers, who hope to steal him from his present agent and publisher. He is being invited to nauseating literary teas in New York —and the scrofulous gentry who make up the sickening half world of publishers and editors in their Eastern cesspool of intellectual incest are probably begging him to ride on all of their shoddy merry-go-rounds since he stole a ride when they weren't looking and grabbed a brass ring.

Unquestionably Hollywood is bidding for him, and I doubt not that before long he will be "set" as they say in Hollywood, with some large motion picture company . . . which will be very good for him, since in Hollywood, at least he will have fresh air and sunshine which is a whole lot more than the Eastern clique of brain boys have to offer a promising writer—all other things East and West being equal.

. . . And so what happened?

Born and reared in Richmond, Virginia, he had conceived such a contempt—as any healthy minded person does—for the decadent locality that he did not even think about it; he forgot to remember, for instance, that whatever Richmond, Virginia, may be now, with its synthetic colonels still bloodlessly fighting the "Wah Between the States," it was once the most glamorous part of North America . . . in the days when the hardy cavaliers had come from Europe to settle it, and

later in the days when real colonels fought real battles and bled real blood to match in intensity the red clay of Virginia.

Born and reared in Richmond, he had always been too close to it to see it—how he finally came to see it I do not know . . . perhaps his Northern wife, when she went to live with him down there, saw it for him, and pointed out to him the tremendous possibilities inherent in the fact that he knew all about it and could sit down and write about it authoritatively and with feeling.

At any rate, he wrote a novel about Richmond, Virginia, and the Civil War, and things incident, and found himself an outstanding success at last when, through years of fiction writing, he had never been able to make the grade.

Give him a fact to hang on to with his left hand, and he could make prose gesticulations with his right hand that were good for both cash and kudos. Now, if he has any sense, and I'm quite sure that he does have, he will never again write a piece of pure fiction. He will go stake himself to a fact, and around the fact weave his story.

I am not using a hypothetical case; he is a very real person; and his situation is not hypothetical, it is very real, and there are many like him writing today.

The fact that he happened to have a lot of first class research available was not important. Mackinlay Kantor, for instance, was not born in Virginia. He was forced

to spend a great deal of time in a very dismal part of the United States, about which part the least said in literature the better, since its gothic culture is far better forgotten than extolled by a man of Mr. Kantor's gifts.

But Mr. Kantor, with diligent and intelligent research, and by visiting Virginia, was able also to write the type of novel the friend about whom I first spoke in this chapter wrote.

Mr. Kantor's novel, also, ("Long Remember") was a huge success. And because the Civil War was about the only thing that ever happened in the United States that wasn't appallingly bourgeois and had a flavor to it, any number of writers can go on writing about the Civil War into eternity, and if their research is well done make a success of it.

Not that the Civil War, though it is the most chromatic of our national epics is the only thing to be tackled in this way.

Practically nothing worth reading has ever been written about the Winning of the West. Practically nothing worth reading has ever been written about the North American Indians.

Most of what has been written about the Winning of the West, and the North American Indians, has been written by middle class literary mongers who had it in their minds to please the pale intelligence of schoolmarms.

For instance, you who think the North American Indian has been manfully tackled in prose send to Duck-

worth's, in England, for a copy of a book called "The Warrior's Path," written by Mr. Don Ryan.

Mr. Ryan is an American writer; he has published "Angel's Flight," (Boni & Liveright) and, "Roman Holiday" (Macaulay.) His "The Warrior's Path," is one of the finest novels written in our country during this decade. He sent it to every large book publisher in New York, and no one of the feeble wights had the guts to publish it, because for the first time it spoke of the North American Indians as they really were; it told of their phallic worship; their various sadistic and masochistic orgies; it plainly related the truth about the braves who so often selected young boys of the tribe to be their constant companions. Mr. Ryan, although he writes for pictures, for a living, is a very fine writer, and a very fine writer who did not attain to his full stature until he spent five years in research for "The Warrior's Path." His research in that quarter was exhaustive; he is the first writer in the United States ever to tackle the North American Indians honestly and fearlessly, and the first English publisher who saw the book tackled it with loud acclaim.

So far our writing about the Winning of the West has been confined largely to an extension of the type of writing that the Horatio Alger Junior series represented, and upon which most of us who are around middle age now nearly ruined our sense of literary values in early youth, due to the mawkish encouragement of

our elders who, in those days, had a literary appreciation which may be exactly defined as totally imbecilic.

In our writing of the early West, our covered wagon tourists are almost always noble men and virtuous women; whereas the facts are precisely to the contrary. Indians are invariably represented not as Indians, but as either fiends on the one hand, or noble creatures who love white girls and do not touch them but give their lives for them.

Until Miss Mitchell led off with "Gone with the Wind," we used to write that way about the Civil War. Now we are just discovering the Civil War, in a literary sense, after having spewed forth an hundred thousand silly books about it, writing of it as an exaggerated boy scouts drill where everyone was noble, brave, honest and true blue.

I predict that the next literary discovery will be this rich heritage in the *real* early Western research department.

Another rich department for research, and for colorful historical novels, is concerned with the Spanish in California, the early days of Los Angeles, and San Diego.

This too has been written about in the Rollo boy manner by that mentally impoverished group of rascals predicated upon the literary traditions of early New England.

The impact of the Eastern Americans upon the Southern California Spaniards will provide amazing

material; material not unlike that provided by the real Civil War facts.

Not that I feel there is any real necessity for going back into the past for material. The average writer, and reader, today, feels a certain restfulness in the past because he believes the present is annoying. As a matter of fact, of course, the past was far less pleasant than the present. When one compares, for instance, the plumbing of the past, and of the present—the horrible narrowness of the religious views of the past, which made life miserable for everyone with a jot of bounciness in them —with the Crane plumbing of today, and the blithe way people go to church, if at all, only for social reasons, or business reasons. . .

I cannot write a word of anything from research. Facts annoy me, as you may have noticed. I would much rather sit down and build everything from scratch; and most fiction writers like to do that.

And if you have that kind of mind, that is the way to write; but if you have not that kind of mind, for goodness sake do not persist in trying to establish it beyond a reasonable point. There is many a writer today, straining and groaning and making himself miserable over the lack of a plot, who, if he would simply give up, and turn to something factual, would go ahead with such dash and vigor as to amaze himself and cause his wife yet longer to refrain from divorce or suicide.

If I were a Chicago writer, and felt myself inadequate and estopped before the problem of plot and story, I

would tackle the life of Mr. Shedd, who began as an office boy for Marshall Field, and ended up as the donator of an aquarium to the city. I would write such a novel not with the specific personality exposited, but I would study Mr. Shedd's life—and I consider him a thoroughly estimable man according to the American traditions of an estimable man and mean no disrespect to his memory here—and *approximate* it in a fiction character, being careful to avoid sufficient similarity to have his relatives suing for libel.

If I lived in Denver and today had to produce a short story or die, and couldn't develop a plot to save me, I would write a story about any one of ten thousand things that have happened in and near Denver recently or long ago. The last time I was in Denver I was driving around with a writer there who notoriously cannot plot and who is miserable about it; and who should make himself heir to the rich natural stories and plots lying around loose all over the place.

As we rode, after he had finished telling me he couldn't plot, he laconically pointed to a spot high in the mountains where we then were and told me that a year before there had been a cloudburst, the water had backed up in a small canyon, and then burst out in a wall fifty feet high and drowned twenty tourists in half a minute. With the canyon there to describe; all the topography—all the realistic details of this curious happening, and a girl and boy added, even a professor of

literature should have been able to fabricate a story of some sort.

All the glamorous figures of early New York have been completely neglected by the short story writers, novelists, and even the Picture Industry. Of course any amount of stupid guff has been written about them being sickeningly noble and loving one woman to the grave but never touching her and so on; but there they still are, vital, living entities, more alive today, perhaps, than they were when they lived; the mere tracing back of their histories should make possible any number of sound novels and short stories.

To say nothing of the early days of New England, when the rapacious scoundrels who established the Hudson Bay trading posts roamed about devouring anything and everybody they came across so that their descendants could become smugly rich socialites on the proceeds of their thievings and their murderous dealings with naïve Indians.

On Cape Cod, today, any number of sterile writers, one in particular whom I will not embarrass by mentioning, sit and write year in and year out dubious garbage about how quaint the Portuguese are, and how pretty is a clap board house—and isn't the sound of crickets at night sweet . . . and so on, ad nauseam.

Who has ever written the stories to be found in the records of the various town halls along Cape Cod? The story, for instance, of how the supposedly pure Pilgrims landing on Cape Cod before they landed at Plymouth

Rock, deliberately stole, during the winter, the entire food store of the—up to that time—friendly Indians; thus bringing upon themselves later all the fury they blamed on the character of the Indians.

Nobody has ever really tackled these putrid, praying, hypocrites who came over in the Mayflower, and later ships, and caused all their own troubles by double dealing with the Indians, and with each other . . . when they weren't busy praying and building churches.

Our whole American history, all of our national legends lie ready and waiting for those writers who cannot plot but who can follow now in the tradition of the late handling of the Civil War by vigorous writers, and begin again at the inception of Americana and tell the truth about it. The research is everywhere easily available.

But far more interesting to me would be novels about the growth, for instance, of the A. T. and T. and other huge American monopolies and gigantic business enterprises. The story of the Western Union telegraph company, and all its colorful characters has never been told; the long fight (which is a fight no more due to business reasons) between the Western Union and the Postal Telegraph companies for control of franchises.

Suppose, for instance, you are not really fiction minded, but do have a flair for prose.

If you sit down to write a short story or a novel about a fictitious person, you do two things: you write, and you imagine.

If you are strong on writing and weak on imagination, what more simple than to seek out in contemporary quarters, or in past history, the life of a man or a woman. Sit down and write it out in the briefest possible detail, covering the life span, the contributing incidents, the things that made or broke that person or persons. Then go over it, alter it sufficiently to prevent exact recognition of the subject on the part of the reader, and you have your novel plot.

Or, if it is to be a commercial short story, with an impossible life situation in it; for those who cannot plot the thing becomes infinitely simplified if recourse is had to the real life happenings of a real individual . . . carried to the point of culmination of the incident. In real life incidents never fall in short story order—at least not in the exacting and highly preposterous short story order required by commercial magazines, presently. But such life happenings do follow a logical bent usually, to a point; given that much to work on even the completely plot blind should then be able to supply an illogical bent superimposed upon the logical bent; that is to say, given nine tenths of a plot to begin with, taken from research, even the writer whose only gift is for smooth prose should be able to supply an additional tenth quirk to take the thing from the realms of the understandable into the realms of the fantastic, for magazine consumption.

To make the thing very clear and to take a case in point suppose we inquire into what manner of woman

Amelia Earhart was. Research to this end would be voluminous. Suppose, then, we inquire into what manner of man her husband, Mr. Putnam, may be. It is not hard to find that out, from research.

We discover that Miss Earhart was a woman curiously lacking in fear, and in this regard obviously quite different from the average woman.

We discover that Mr. Putnam is a man of super-refined restraints, with the dignity and poise to permit his wife to lead her own life in her own way even if it involve her death.

In this regard, obviously Mr. Putnam is totally different from the average American husband.

To invent two such stupendous characters would be a task which many a person who can write well could not possibly accomplish, *because the writer without a fiction mind usually does not visualize characters greatly dissimilar from himself.*

Given these two characters anyone would naturally begin to wonder how they impinge upon each other in private life.

How they impinge upon each other in private life is nobody's business, and the fiction writer has no more right to write of that then he has to spy upon them objectively. But, since they are both "public characters" in the interpretation of courts, dozens of articles have been written about them; there is reference to them in books; newspaper files contain endless material about them.

As the writer who cannot plot studies this material, much of it hopelessly conflicting, of course, two living people begin to take tremendous hold upon his mind; and the more he studies them from all the available sources, the more he wonders.

Finally Miss Earhart bravely goes off into the unknown and never comes back. The navy goes out in search of her, and does not find her. So then what has become of her and her pilot? The papers do not say. Nobody knows. But the writer who cannot plot here has nine tenths of his plot. The one tenth remains. What happened to Miss Earhart? Is she alive somewhere, on some not charted island? Mr. Putnam was asked if he would take a yacht and spend the rest of his life looking for her. He very sensibly replied that he would not because the navy had covered more territory than he could cover in a lifetime on a private yacht. But suppose he did charter a yacht. Suppose he did find her under unusual circumstances; suppose he did not find her for twenty years, and then they were reunited. Suppose practically anything. Perhaps she was rescued by a Russian ship, which did not report the rescue, and the Russians imprisoned her in Russia, to force her to teach their pilots certain valuable matters concerning aviation—far fetched, you say, this last? Read the current novelette in Red Book, Cosmopolitan or what not, and see if they aren't *more* far fetched.

Suppose, for instance, that an aviatrix *like* Amelia Earhart (distinctly not Amelia Earhart) is married to

a man *like* Mr. Putnam (distinctly not Mr. Putnam). Suppose her publicity overwhelms him, and he becomes a pale reflection of his wife, much to the detriment of his essential character.

Suppose she notices this, and wonders what to do about it? Suppose she decides that since he is an excellent woodsman, having spent all his vacations in the North Woods of Canada, she will take him and make a forced landing with him in the North Woods and let him somehow get her out of it. Suppose she does just that, and he, after great efforts, gets her out of the mess and saves her life and is plastered over all the front pages as a hero. . . . Whereupon his ego is restablished and they live happily ever after.

Would that make a story, do you think? You bet it would. I sold it for a rattling good price.

In this connection, of course, it is important not to base such research stories on newspaper research, because too many writers always do that and when some such big story breaks editors will be pelted with stories founded upon the news story. Research should always go beyond mere story content as gleaned from newspapers, it should go back into the antecedents of the characters themselves, if contemporary; or, if historical, it should go into the field of *general* research; research, as in "Gone with the Wind," which covers an entire era, and leads the one making the research through a whole library of books on the subject.

Viewing the astounding phenomenon of Margaret

Mitchell, I often wonder what would have happened to her if, instead of writing from research, she had decided to write directly, as I do. Probably she has not the fiction mind. Probably if she had written little plot stories, and finally a fictionally fabricated novel, she would still be among the mediocre and the impecunious. I do not particularly admire her book, because it seems to me psychologically and philosophically superficial; but I tremendously admire her efficiency; her intuitive adjustment, her awareness of what she could do best. I understand that her takings on the one book were in the aggregate approximately half a million dollars. That, I presume, is what comes of recognizing one's limitations and abilities intelligently. Because editors are notorious sycophants I do not think that Margaret Mitchell could possibly write a short story so bad that any editor in New York would fail to accept it on sight.

But if anyone would like to arrange the details I should be willing to bet a considerable sum that Margaret Mitchell cannot write either a plotted short story or novel and sell it under another name anywhere.

Which is simply to say again that there are various types of writers; the pragmatic type and the imaginative type—and if you are the one, it is no good trying to be the other.

Research is the devil of a hard job, but in many cases it pays off enormously.

chapter--

XXX

EPILOGUE: WHO WANTS WHAT YOU WRITE?

SINCE I WROTE THE FIRST EDITION OF THIS book, some years ago, a remarkable new element has entered into writing in this country, which did not exist then.

It is entirely possible that this book—since its continuing sale astounds me—may go on beyond the point where this new element shall fade out of writing.

But the principles, I fancy, will remain for some time, since they existed in one form or another for years before they were as clearly defined as they have been lately.

I refer, of course, to the various government subsidized writing projects, into whose ramifications I have here and there examined, both directly, and, by correspondence, indirectly.

It is curious the craven timidity that government employees always assume; it seems to be an earnest of the fact that they secretly feel that they hold their jobs not because they are worth anything, but because they are related to somebody, or helped elect some-

body, or got a letter of recommendation from somebody who wanted to get rid of them painlessly, to somebody who doesn't want to employ them but has to.

I have corresponded with some of those officially connected with the various writer's projects, but they always preface their letters with long pleas that I not quote them; that I not even read the letters they send me . . . that I burn the letters, that I do not even *think* about their letters, which they are sorry they have written on the one hand, but are for some reason afraid not to write on the other hand.

And when I talk to them, they look around in all directions, and lower their voices, and cringe, and remind me of convicts talking out of the corners of their mouths. But, at any rate, I here quote none of them, individually; but give you the consensus of various of their replies to queries of mine addressed to them verbally, in letters, by telephone, and by telegram. I asked them, in essence:

"Why does the Federal Government, in its various writing projects, employ for foreman, overseers, supervisors, and what not, only those who are, at least theoretically, fitted to teach aesthetic writing instead of practical writing; considering the fact that those whom they teach, or advise, or supervise, or intimidate, are faced not with an artistic problem, but with an economic problem?"

Reducing the replies I got to two words, the general tenor of them all is:

"Christ knows!"

Reversing the Federal process, and going from the sublime to the practical, who and what are these writers on the government's payroll, and what in hell are they doing?

I have a wide acquaintance among writers, and some of them are working under Federal administrators. I addressed a great many of these, either directly or indirectly. I asked them what they were doing in the way of writing for the Federal Government, and what was becoming of it. In essence they answered:

"Christ knows!"

So, clinically, then, we have a group of literary petty bosses, employed by the Federal Government, to harry a group of luckless writers, paid miserly salaries by the Federal Government to do, as they both explain, "Christ knows what!"

Some of these Federal bosses of the writing projects are men and women of considerable prestige and talent.

Some of those stuck on Uncle Sam's payrolls, as writers, are men and women of talent and singular gifts.

Upon one point at least the Federal bosses of the writing projects, and the peons under them seem to agree: that the whole thing is hideously abortive, that it gets nobody anywhere, and that if they could find honest work they would prefer it to what they have.

Then let us view the whole problem objectively: that is, let us go back to the hazards of writing before our present Federal projects were ever heard of, and let us try to project ourselves into the future.

Objectively we find that certain writers with reputations for one reason or another found themselves behind the eight ball, and were glad to be put in charge of Federal writing projects; and, with equal objectiveness we find that a large group of people were able to prove that they were, after a fashion, writers of a sort, at one time or another, got themselves put on the Federal payrolls under these others who had better reputations, more pull, or were more closely related to congressmen.

. . . So that they both face each other each day with hell in their hearts and frustration in their souls.

Why?

How I wish that I were God, so that I could answer that question definitively.

Yet, doing a fade out from the milieu we are now in, and remembering that the problem of the subsidized writer is as old as history, perhaps we may manage to approach the question after all.

It gets back, does it not, almost at once, to the age old—and I doubt not the eternally perplexing questions:

"What is art? What is truth?"

If these writers on the Federal projects are great artists, and if their foremen and forewomen are great truth tellers then they are writing the immortal literature for the ages to come—we hope.

But they have a curious way of doubting this, themselves.

In this connection, I am mindful of Lesbos, and Sappho.

No doubt, if the Island of Lesbos had had a head man with Mr. Roosevelt's vision, Sappho, when she found herself unable to interest more than that portion of the population which contained notions at variance with the dull electorate, would have been put on the Lesbian W. P. A. to write what she pleased, just so the electorate never saw much of it.

But alas, at that time, the dictator of the Island of Lesbos was a dreary Babbitt who raided her joint, shagged her out of the vicinity, and, in effect said, "The hell with art, and with annoying truths."

For centuries we have all been bemoaning this fact, because most of the Sapphic poems have been lost, and there is no evidence to preclude the fact that poor Sappho finally starved to death.

Of Francois Villon, also, we have only the most ambiguous records.

He, too, swung a mean pen, was always on the point of starvation, and disappeared mysteriously, lacking a Roosevelt and a project.

And, if you will remember, this process goes on for centuries; skipping a few centuries, we come upon Edgar Allan Poe, and little Stephen Crane, who, during his lifetime could never, possibly, have saved up enough money to buy one of the various de luxe volumes of his collected works now obtainable.

. . . So I think we are justified in presuming a

W. P. A. that took charge of Sappho, Francois Villon, Stephen Crane, and those other delightful souls who left immortal literature.

Examining into the matter very closely we find that all of these eccentrics had one thing in common.

They were aside from the norms of their age, and they were not satisfied with taking it out in behavior not approved by whatever religious and political dullards had charge of the ages they lived in.

They yelped and screamed about it with pen and ink, and they didn't seem to care a hoot how many or how few of their contemporaries bothered to read their exhibitionistic substantiations of whatever rationalizations they contained, set down upon paper.

To them it was merely a matter of setting it down upon paper; seeing it in black and white, or in purple and orange, or in any other definition of the soul storms that egged them on.

And because each age forgets the religious and political stupidities of the former age their writings stand out in the ruck as valuable for the single reason that they were sincere.

The other writers around them, who were highly valued by the critics of their ages, which critics compare in all things with the highest rated critics of our age, were forgotten.

Think for a moment upon all the polite, well behaved poets of Sappho's time; the poets who wrote according to the religious and political tenets of the age, made a

living at it, and were perfectly satisfied with such a consummation to their temporal existences.

Try to remember some of the well thought of poets of Francois Villon's time.

Call to mind if you can the short story writers contemporary with Stephen Crane in our own country, who bowed to the religious edicts then extant, and offended in nothing, politically.

There is absolutely no point of agreement or consistency between an eccentric writer who writes because he must, and the complaisant writer who writes for slick paper.

The point of ambiguity comes when you find writers who have piquant eccentricity, combined with commercial non-comprehension and inability.

That is to say, writers who are on the W. P. A. now, and would have been on the W. P. A. in Sappho's time, or in any age of literature since then.

The persistent failure to recognize the fact that the commercial writer has absolutely nothing in common with the exhibitionistic eccentric has perplexed critics, legislatures, deacons and worse for ages and ages, and will, I doubt not, continue so to do.

When the eccentric writer sets himself down with pen and ink he never for a moment thinks:

"Who wants what I write?"

He thinks to himself only: "I must write."

When the commercial writer sits down with his secre-

tary, or before his electric typewriter, he thinks to himself only:

"Who wants what I write?"

And the only possible answer to that question for the commercial writer is:

"My contemporaries."

His next job then becomes to find out what his contemporaries, by quantity, currently believe, and whoop for it.

Because the average successful commercial writer is a man with intelligence a cut above his fellows he knows, well enough, that what his contemporaries believe is a lot of bilge. He knows the mutations of life . . . he knows that the church and the state throw themselves against all advancing mutations desperately, in order to protect what gangsters succinctly call "The Take."

He recognizes himself, in short, as a manufacturer, manufacturing a product for the *current* market.

Probably the cleverest of all these men are in Hollywood, since most of them in Hollywood make the most money.

They realize, in Hollywood, that the writing business is no different from the leading industry of Detroit.

In Detroit the manufacturers contrive and deliver cheap ecstasy in tin; in Hollywood the manufacturers contrive and deliver cheap ecstasy in celluloid.

But somewhere along the line the whole process got mixed up and so compromised as to land in the hands of politicians.

Writers who had never quite made up their minds whether they wanted to write for the current market or for their own exhibitionistic impulsions found that through the fact that they had written and delivered and been paid for both sorts of writing they could get the government to support them, on the theory that they were the Sapphos, the Francois Villons and the Stephen Cranes of their times.

But they found, even though they *could* get the government to support them, they were *still* miserable.

Because they could not make up their minds . . . as to whether they wished to be writing eccentrics, or cash and carry prosateurs.

The thing is not new. It has been going on for generations, and it will go on for generations.

But to those to whom a word is sufficient, may I suggest that there is no compromising.

. . . If you would write for profit, find out who wants what you write, and give them whatever they expect to find in your writing.

If you write because you must . . . either follow Mr. Mencken's advice and marry someone who will keep you for a pet, or get into another line for a living, and write as an avocation.

And this, my friend, is the end. Don't whimper. I have not deserted you without having left every weapon of the free lance fiction racketeer in your hands. And now let me quote that man who contributed more,

probably, than any other man who ever lived, to the cause of practical and useful education:

"However great a man's natural talents may be, the art of writing cannot be learnt all at once."—Jean Jacques Rousseau.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

After the original publication of this book, under the title TRIAL AND ERROR—WRITING AND SELLING, many people wrote in expressing their appreciation for the frankness with which it reveals the secrets of the writing profession. A great many enthusiastically mentioned that they had written and sold stories on the basis of that information. Others, confident that they could sell stories, wrote to ask the author, Jack Woodford, for his personal assistance. Since Mr. Woodford could not comply with all these requests, he developed a series of assignments, based on the book, which, in practice, has given aspiring authors the same sort of assistance they would have received had they worked personally with Mr. Woodford.

Readers of this volume who desire more information about these assignments may address their inquiries to the original publishers, Carlyle House, 535 Fifth Avenue, New York City.

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